

World Literatures in Temporal Perspective

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David Damrosch,

"World Literatures in Temporal Perspective"
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Abstract: In his article "World Literatures in Temporal Perspective" David Damrosch discusses the vexed problem of how to shape a literary history into definable and meaningful periods without simply projecting old Western patterns onto new ages and distant areas of the world. This problem becomes acute when one seeks to create a genuinely global literary history. Damrosch surveys some early periodizations according to patterns of infancy, growth, maturity, and decline, and discusses the often unrealized persistence of biblical and classical models in modern accounts of the literary histories of Egypt, Mesoamerica, and India.

David DAMROSCH

World Literatures in Temporal Perspective

The challenges of putting the world's literatures in proper perspective are often considered in spatial terms as suggested by such terms as "globalization" and "planetarity," of how to "map" the expansive landscape of world literatures. Yet equally important is to consider how we may need to rethink our historical perspectives as well. History may be a sequence of one damn thing after another, but history writing rarely allows itself to think so. Any historiography more ambitious than the barest king list or chronology is shaped, made into a narrative. This fact is clearer in languages such as German and French than in English, as *Geschichte* or *histoire* can be a fictional tale as readily as a factual record, a dual meaning that English lost after the era of such works as Fielding's *History of Tom Jones, a Foundling*. Such narrative shaping is necessary for the historian and welcome to the reader, but once a history extends beyond the span of an individual life or a single generation the question becomes how to avoid introducing a distorting chronological logic in the process. This question is too rarely asked within literary-historical studies, despite the fact that literary history and criticism rely heavily on periodization as a basic structural means of dividing up fields of study. Usually retrospective, our periodizations often carry an element of arbitrariness, their boundaries fuzzy, shifting, or sometimes suspiciously precise. Should we speak of "nineteenth-century literature" or of "the long nineteenth century"? Should Europeanists continue to use the time-honored term "the Renaissance" with all its cultural and ideological baggage or shift to the new historicist "Early Modern Period" with its own ideological assumptions and chronological implications?

Already questionable in individual national histories, which can at least be organized within local time frames such as the Tang Dynasty or the reign of Queen Victoria, our customary periodizations become problematic when we attempt to set the world's literatures in historical perspective. The problem goes deeper than the challenge of avoiding Eurocentrism in any obvious sense. In many instances, commonly accepted periodizations within individual cultural histories around the world continue to be shaped according to deep "chronologics," sometimes home-grown, but often imported or adapted from the West, which are often taken for granted rather than subjected to critical scrutiny. My argument here is that to make real sense of the world's literary histories, we are going to need to think about a complex set of interlocking chronologics, an often contradictory mix of natural, secular, and religious temporal frames which run through literary studies, but are rarely discussed and put in question.

It is sometimes said that Western historiography is marked by its linearity, as compared to the cyclical patterns often found elsewhere, such as the cycle of eons described in the Vedas, the five ages of the world seen in the Aztec "Legend of the Suns," or the cyclical rise and fall of dynasties during China's long history (Fuglestad 11). There may be some truth to this distinction. While running a world literature program in China in the summer of 2011, I visited several historical sites, including Confucius's birthplace, which had accumulated inscriptions and sculptures over many centuries. I was always curious to know the date of a particular monument, but I found that the Chinese scholars with whom I made the visit were much more interested to know what dynasty it came from. Supplied with this information, they had placed the sculpture or inscription in time to their satisfaction, although they sometimes could not tell me within five hundred years just when the work had been created, partly owing to the length of the major dynasties, but also because the dating of the dynasties themselves was not particularly important for them.

No simple opposition can really be maintained, however, between a Western linearity and a non-Western cyclicity. If the Chinese dynasties have traditionally been described as exhibiting common cyclical patterns of rise, flourishing, and decline, they are nonetheless set in a linear sequence whose dates will be well known at least to specialists. Nor are long sequences of numbered years a uniquely Western invention. The Maya saw history in terms of a cyclical succession of ages, but their calendar employed a sophisticated interlocked system of thirteen- and twenty-year cycles that allowed them to create a "Long Count" by which they could place events precisely for centuries in the past. Conversely, Westerners to this day organize much of their life according to the cyclical rhythms of the solar year and lunar-based weeks and months, often further overlaying the natural and secular calendars with a

separate religious year built around major religious festivals such as Christmas and Easter or the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashanah.

Our "secular" calendar itself hinges on a pivotal date in Christian theology, the birth of Christ, or more precisely the birth of Christ as calculated in 525 by the Roman monk Dionysius Exiguus, who had no interest in secular historiography, but wished to establish a firm basis for calculating the date of Easter. Dionysius's division of time into the era before Christ's incarnation and the new age of the "Anno Domini" is often de-theologized in historical writing today through the adoption of the more neutral BCE ("Before the Common Era") and CE ("Common Era"), terms first advanced by nineteenth-century Jewish scholars who did not wish to make an implicit theological statement every time they mentioned a date. Yet a simple change of initials may not in itself create a purely secular history. How far is the older salvational chronology — essentially an eschatology in waiting — still operative for us today, thinly disguised in the nominal shift from BC to BCE and from AD to CE?

The Sumerian King List, dating back to the third millennium BCE, is little more than a bare-bones chronology, but it already divides time into a "before" and an "after," a numinous era "before the Flood swept over" — a time when kings lived to fantastic ages of 28,000 years or more — and the post-Flood era, whose kings rapidly come to live out their lives within the typical span of human experience. The basic pattern of "then" versus "now," of present times versus the good or bad old days, can equally play out on an individual level, often reflecting a break between our childhood and our maturity. When my daughter Eva was fifteen, I discovered that for her the term "modern" meant "since 1990" — anytime, that is, after the end of her childhood. Such a division can be personal and more broadly historical as well. Visiting the church of Saint Ursula in Köln in 1976, I admired the beautiful carvings of the pews in the choir and wondered when they might have been done: in the eighteenth century, perhaps, or as far back as the sixteenth? I asked a sacristan who was sweeping the floor nearby, a woman some forty-five or fifty years old, and she replied that the pews had indeed been made a long while back — "Ganz vor dem Krieg!" Thirty years after the end of World War II, history hinged for her on the war, the dividing line between her own youth and adulthood, as well as between prewar and postwar eras.

The sacristan was no historian, but even in historical scholarship today, our periodizations continue to echo old habits of personalizing history by shaping it to our life history, even to our bodily contours. Living in exile in Babylon in the early sixth century BCE, the prophet Ezekiel reenacted the history of the decline and fall of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, shifting years into days and mapping the northern and southern kingdoms onto the sides of his body. In commanding this symbolic performance, God orders Ezekiel to lie down on his left side, "and put the sin of the people of Israel upon yourself. You are to bear their sin for the number of days you lie on your side. I have assigned you the same number of days as the years of their sin. So for 390 days you will bear the sin of the people of Israel. After you have finished this, lie down again, this time on your right side, and bear the sin of the people of Judah. I have assigned you 40 days, a day for each year. Turn your face toward the siege of Jerusalem and with bared arm prophesy against her. I will tie you up with ropes so that you cannot turn from one side to the other until you have finished the days of your siege" (Ezekiel 4: 4-8).

In the Book of Daniel, the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar has a dream that renders four historical periods in human form. In his dream, he sees "a large statue — an enormous, dazzling statue, awesome in appearance. The head of the statue was made of pure gold, its chest and arms of silver, its belly and thighs of bronze, its legs of iron, its feet partly of iron and partly of baked clay" (Daniel 2: 31-33). The young Hebrew prophet Daniel explains to the king that each part of the statue refers to a dynasty: his own age of gold is soon to be followed by a series of worse and worse dynasties, culminating in a divided kingdom symbolized by the mixed iron and clay feet, whereupon God will intervene and establish an eternal kingdom of his own making. The biblical author here takes up what is probably ancient Indo-European imagery of the "Ages of Man" or of the universe overall. Vedic and Hindu texts describe four great *yugas* comprising a primal golden age followed by a progressive moral decline into silver, bronze, and iron ages. According to the Laws of Manu (ca. 500 BCE), these four ages then repeat themselves over and over again on a 24,000-year cycle. In the Greek world, the imagery of four metallic ages was taken up around 700 BCE by Hesiod — who added in a fifth "heroic" age between the bronze age and the present age of iron — and was then given

classic expression by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses* (1: 89-150). Thirteen hundred years later, in the fourteenth canto of the *Inferno* Dante would combine the Book of Daniel's statue and Ovid's ages in the figure of the *gran veglio* or Old Man of Crete: the vast statue from whose weeping fissures flow the tears that create the rivers of the underworld. Appropriately, Dante locates his haunting figure of world-historical decline and fall in *mezzo mar* between Athens and Jerusalem.

These early historiographies have more than purely historical interest. Far from disappearing with the waning of ancient and medieval allegory, a fourfold, body-based historiography took on new life at the hands of the father of modern art history, Johann Joachim Winckelmann. Already in his important 1755 treatise *Reflections on the Painting and Sculpture of the Greeks* (33) Winckelmann argued that "Arts have their infancy as well as men; they begin, like the artist, with froth and bombast" before they later mature. Deeply interested in the influence of the body upon aesthetics (he dwells in the *Reflections* on the inspiring nakedness of Greek youths in their gymnastic exercises), Winckelmann extended and formalized an organicist periodization in his influential *History of the Art of Antiquity* (1764), the first work to divide a history of art into defined periods. In the ancient Mediterranean world as a whole, Winckelmann posited a period of artistic infancy (typified by Egyptian art); artistic production then reached vibrant youth and then maturity in Greece, before entering a Roman period of imitative decline. Within Greece itself, Winckelmann discerned four comparable periods: the archaic (seen especially in Etruscan art), the vigorous, sublime style of the fifth century, a mature style of elegance in the fourth century, and then the decline into imitative Hellenistic art.

The fourfold periodization of history is remarkably impervious to the passage of time. Writing in the reign of the emperor Augustus, Ovid already felt himself to be living in the world's fourth age, as did Dante thirteen centuries later; seven hundred years further along, we no longer feel coeval with Ovid or even Dante, but rather than add on new periods we often still divide Western history in four eras (the ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern), shifting Dante from his fourth to our second period and Ovid from his fourth to our first period. Something, of course, has changed: whereas the older fourfold pattern had been one of decline from gold down to iron and clay, Enlightenment ideas of progress shifted the valence from negative to positive. While a pessimist like Oswald Spengler might return to the older rhetoric of cultural decline amid the traumas of the First World War, it became more usual to view history in terms of progress from primitive immaturity to an enlightened and civilized present, a periodization given a global turn in Hegel's *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* (1837), with its successive unfolding of the world spirit in the Oriental, the Greek, the Roman, and finally the Germanic worlds.

Winckelmann's mapping of the Ovidian four-period paradigm onto the social body inspired many subsequent cultural historians, and not only of Western cultures. Versions of this pattern are clearly visible, for example, in the periodizations that nineteenth-century European and US-American archaeologists and art historians devised for the ancient Near East and then for Mesoamerica as they began to move outward from the classical world. In *What Is World Literature?*, I have compared these fields of study in terms of the contemporary shift toward revaluating the late periods in both regions; here I would like to reconsider the larger logic of this periodization. To begin with Egypt, in antiquity Egyptian history had been understood in dynastic terms by the Egyptians themselves and by such outside observers as Herodotus, but the long chain of dynasties stretching into the distant past, more or less vaguely recalled by the time Herodotus visited Thebes in around 450 BCE, was not shaped into any broad periods. This changed when modern historians came to recover and reconstruct Egypt's history in the decades after Champollion's decipherment of the Rosetta Stone. Egypt's thirty-two dynasties were seen to have fallen into four broad periods, labeled the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, the New Kingdom, and the Late Period. Three periods of severe dynastic disruption were shoehorned in between the major periods as the first, second, and third "Intermediate Periods."

Roughly equal in their temporal reach, the four Egyptian periods carried with them an implicit narrative shape, one with unfortunate consequences for the study of the final millennium of Egyptian art and literature. Very much in a Winckelmannian mode, this periodization privileged the three great periods of infancy, youth, and maturity, with the belated "Late Period" becoming a little-studied era of political weakness and cultural decline. Developed primarily by archaeologists, this periodization led until quite recently to a widespread neglect of the lively and varied literature of the "decadent" Late Period. When I studied hieroglyphics in the late 1970s, the center of gravity of Egyptian language and

literature was understood to be the Middle Kingdom, from which one could go back to the pyramid and coffin texts of the Old Kingdom or forward to the tales and love poems of the New Kingdom, but little attention was given to anything written during more than a thousand years during the Late Period. Egyptologists also advanced this perspective in the anthologies they prepared for non-specialized audiences, such as Siegfried Schott's *Altägyptisches Liebeslieder* (1950) and W.K. Simpson's *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (1972), both of which stopped with the end of the New Kingdom in ca. 1090 BCE.

The Late Period finally began to get serious attention in the 1980s, in a shift signaled by the appearance of Miriam Lichtheim's three-volume anthology *Ancient Egyptian Literature* (1975-80). Instead of dividing her volumes to present the literatures of the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms as earlier scholars would have done, Lichtheim combined the Old and Middle Kingdoms, assigned the second volume to the New Kingdom, and devoted the entire third volume to the Late Period, arguing in her introduction to the final volume that this rich and complex period should no longer be "summarily treated as a phase of decline" ("Introduction" 3). This was a welcome expansion of study into a millennium that had long been cast into shadow, but it was something less than a broad revision of the old fourfold pattern.

Egypt had represented a logical next step into antiquity for archaeologists and art historians in the generations following Winckelmann, but similar chronologies came to be applied to more distant cultures as well. This can be seen in the case of Mesoamerica, for which scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries devised a similar fourfold chronology, once again favoring the first three periods over a fourth and final period of hybridity and decline. After an archaic prehistory not marked by substantial artistic remains, Mesoamerican art history comes into full force with "the Preclassic Period" (2000 BCE - 200 CE), followed by "the Classic Period" featuring the flourishing of Mayan civilization (c. 200-950 CE), then enters "the Post-Classic Period" dominated by the Aztecs until the arrival of the Spaniards, whereupon the "Colonial Period" begins with the fall of the Aztec capital, Tenochtitlan, in 1521. Like Egypt's Late Period, the Colonial Period in Mesoamerica was largely seen as only the aftermath of the three key earlier periods, and colonial literary texts were studied largely for their reflection of pre-Conquest times. Even the cultures most active during the "Postclassic" period were imitative echoes of the morally and artistically superior Classic. As Mary Miller and Karl Taube have noted, the Aztecs became the rough-and-ready Romans to the Maya's noble Greeks (11).

As with Egypt, the late period is receiving new respect and attention today, as colonial Mexico and Guatemala come to be seen as crucial and creative contact zones rather than as scenes of loss of authenticity, of death and cultural decay. It is good that the fascinating literature of these hybrid periods is now receiving its due, but the shifting of the valence of a period from negative to positive is not after all such a major shift, and the larger fourfold structure can have problematic effects even when its practitioners acknowledge its arbitrariness. Writing on Mesoamerica in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in 1976, William Sanders noted that Aztec and Mayan cultures could no longer be neatly divided into two opposing camps occupying two clearly distinct historical periods. "It has been asserted," he remarked, that the "Classic period was one of relatively peaceful contact between polities, of the absence of large imperialistic states and empires (and of the militaristic élan and organization that accompanies such states). The Classic has been further characterized by the absence of true cities, by theocratic rather than secular government, and by an overall superiority of arts and crafts ... In contrast, the Post-Classic was characterized as a period of intense warfare and highly organized military organization, of empires and cities, of secular government, and of overall artistic decline" (947). Sanders was describing the (then still common) opposition between the peaceful, rural Maya and the bloodthirsty, city-dwelling Aztecs. Classic native culture, as exemplified by otherworldly Mayan astrologers and nurturing, corn-growing earth mothers, was to be everything that modern European culture was not, and so the postclassic imperialists could only be decadents, their steroidal warrior-priests using human sacrifice as an instrument of conquest, their corruption extending even to their art. Sanders went on to note that "recent research, however, has cast considerable doubt on these conclusions" (947). The Maya proved to have had large cities, to have practiced extensive human sacrifice, and to have engaged in frequent warfare, while on the Aztec side there had begun to be new appreciation for the positive role of religion in Aztec society and for the specific beauties of their art.

As alive as Sanders was to the artificiality of the distinctions between Classic and Post-Classic Mesoamerican cultures, a rather different view was expressed by Michael Coe in the section on the Classic period immediately preceding Sanders's contribution on Post-Classic history. Writing on the Maya before 900 CE, Coe argued that "most of what is known about ancient Maya religion is inferred from the descriptions that the Spanish friars have left of Maya life and thought on the eve of the conquest. All modern scholars have stressed the deep religious conservatism and resistance to change of the Maya, and it is highly likely that the sixteenth-century picture was not appreciably different from that prevailing in the Late Classic, in spite of centuries of Mexican contact" (946). There is no question that colonial-era texts are invaluable aids to the reconstruction of pre-Conquest culture, but it is still a remarkable claim that several hundred years of contact with the Toltecs and Aztecs had not "appreciably" altered the features of Mayan religion, despite the far-reaching similarities visible in sixteenth-century sources between Mayan and Aztec practices and beliefs. If even six centuries of contact with Aztec culture could be bracketed in this way, then six decades of interaction with the encroaching Spanish culture could all the more readily be erased from the sources, which could then be read as faithful transcripts of ancient beliefs.

Sanders noted in his *Encyclopaedia Britannica* article that "the separation between Post-Classic and Classic is therefore little more than a convenient way of splitting up the long chronicle of Meso-American cultural development into manageable units for discussion and analysis" (947). A convenience, perhaps, but the differential weighting of the two periods may also be a distant echo of the far bloodier struggle that the Spanish had to undertake to subdue their great imperial rivals the Aztecs than the relatively easier time they had with the far more dispersed and disunified Maya. More generally, to locate the essence of native culture in the distant past bears a troubling homology to longstanding Mexican and Guatemalan governmental efforts to exert political, economic, and cultural hegemony over their living native populations. Such intentions are certainly very different from those of the scholars of the area, who are often passionate advocates for contemporary native rights, but this is all the more reason why such little-questioned deep historiographic patterns need to be reexamined today.

The chronologies developed for ancient Egypt and for Mesoamerica were proposed primarily by Western scholars a century and more ago, but surprisingly similar patterns can be found today, developed and used by scholars in other parts of the world for their own literary history. As an example, I would like to look here at the ambitious literary history developed in the 1970s and 1980s by Sisir Kumar Das of Delhi University. Rightly venerated as the founder of modern historiography of Indian literature, Das is too often seen only in that context. He is little read outside India except by specialists, and even in India his magisterial volumes of *A History of Indian Literature* for 1800-1910 and 1911-56 are more often dipped into for specific information than analyzed in any detail. In his contribution to a memorial volume on Das, Harish Trivedi reports that Das "used to say with his familiar warm smile" that everyone seemed to be using his *History*, "but few would discuss it or even acknowledge it!" (58).

In planning out a projected nine volumes of his *History*, Das consulted many prior histories, not only of Indian literature but of other regions and movements as well; in the prologue to his inaugural volume, he cites histories of Canadian, Spanish, Swiss, and Surrealist literatures. He thought deeply about the structuring of his innovative history; of particular interest for the present discussion are his reflections on the problem of the literary historian's imposing an externally derived viewpoint onto a local literary history. Das first laid out his principles in a 1973 programmatic article on "The Idea of an Indian Literature." Here he grappled with the key problems of a global historiography: How to deal with the multiplicity of languages and traditions before the modern era? How to divide the centuries into manageable but also meaningful periods for analysis? How to relate the *longue durée* of prior literary history to the colonial era marked by the introduction of Western modes of education and by the spread of Western forms such as the novel? Before the early 1800s, did Indian literature exist in any real sense as anything more than just an aggregate of the production of separate regions in dozens of individual languages?

Das accepted a broad division of Indian literary history into premodern and modern eras, identifying the modern period as inaugurated by the rapid growth of British power in India after 1800. Yet he strongly resisted the emphasis placed by Western Indologists on the pre-colonial past as the

only great period of Indian literary and cultural history. Instead of seeing the colonial era as a time of political weakness and cultural decline — the common British view of their colonial possessions — Das emphasized the resurgent variety and creativity of Indian literary culture after 1800. Whereas the centuries before then had been unified by the pan-Indian languages of Sanskrit and Pali, and then in large areas by Persian and Arabic, in Das's view it is only after 1800 that the Indian vernaculars come into their own and what Sheldon Pollock has termed "the Sanskrit cosmopolis" fades from the scene. Thereupon the problem of multiplicity becomes acute in India, posing special challenges to literary historians who wish to achieve an overview of the period's extremely varied literary production, and who seek some principled basis on which to define the period's temporal shape.

With characteristic boldness, Das began work on his multivolume history with volume three, covering the years 1800-1910. Here he could locate the crux of the whole problem of unity and multiplicity, doubled with the vexed question of "Western Impact, Indian Response" announced in his subtitle. In his prologue to the volume, Das addresses four major concerns. Recalling the title of his earlier essay, he begins with a section on "The Idea of an Indian Literature." He proceeds to discuss his project's framework and its "modality," the collaborative process of creating the history, and then has a closing discussion on the question of periodization. His overriding concern runs throughout the prologue: both to emphasize the variety and vitality of the twenty-two principle modern Indian literatures, and at the same time to combat the regionalism of champions of the separate study of these literatures in themselves. How to give a unified presentation of such diversity?

Das's basic answer to this problem is to ground literature in its communities of production and reception. "The history of Indian literature as presented here," he says, "is going to be ... an account of forms and themes as created by a community and how they have been replaced by another set of forms and themes, of the conditions under which they were produced and the possible reasons of the decline of some of the forms and of the preference to others. In other words, it is going to be an account of the literary activities of a people" (*A History* 13). Notably, when using the key Sanskrit term *sāhitya* in his prologue, he does not define it as "literature," or even employ some aesthetic term such as "harmony." Instead, Das speaks of "this sense of communality, *sāhitya*, which is the force unifying the Indian people and their activities, social, religious, and intellectual, a force that brings the diverse creative urges together" (*A History* 4-5). Having given *sāhitya* a social connotation, Das proceeds to sharpen his 1973 critique of both Orientalist and nationalist discourses. Whether Indian culture is seen as an ancient mystical oneness or as a politically grounded unity, Das says, historians fail to do justice to India's tremendous diversity: "In addition to its instability of the geo-political boundaries, the diversity of its population in respect of religion and language ... make the idea of an Indian literature appear to be politically motivated at its worst and a theoretical contrivance at its best, but without any real evidence" (*A History* 3). He asserts that Indians do have a genuine sense of communal unity, but emphasizes that "This perception of a unity is not constructed merely in response to a colonial rule, nor it is a mere by-product of the national movement. It is not a part of the pernicious political ideology that identifies one of the Indian traditions as national and everything else as 'regional.' It is as old as the Indian civilization" (*A History* 4).

The force of Das's critique of colonialists and nationalists alike is that they impose a unity from outside on the lively variety of real Indian cultural life. As he declares, the literary historian should "allow the 'collective consciousness' to surface from within rather than imposing certain categories, which many scholars do, from above" (Das, *A History* 11). To this end, Das collected masses of material, much of it supplied in the form of survey essays by contributors specializing in the different Indian vernaculars. Yet it appears that the many contributions he received were too disparate and divergent to yield a coherent history. In the end, it was Das himself who rose to the occasion and imposed an order, a narrative, on the messy, exfoliating, contradictory evidence piling up around him in his study: "This narrative ... is neither a summary nor a mechanical juxtaposition of available materials, but an interpretative account regulated by a concept of change in literary history" (*A History* 17). Das's conception of change is well formulated and effective as the master trope or unifying theme of his great History. Yet it is hard to avoid a sense that Das himself was uncomfortably aware that this unifying theme was, at least to some degree, imposed on the material by the very author who insisted that the historian should never impose his conceptions on the rich variety of the people's cultural life.

Nor was Das's concept of change the only external structure that he brought to his history. Tremendously alive to the wealth of India's vernacular literatures, Das was resolute in resisting any distorting imposition of Western norms on the communal *sāhitya* of Indian life. Yet the temporal frame of his history is strikingly Western in its broad outlines. What, exactly, dictates the delimitation of the volume by the dates 1800 and 1910? And why should these hundred and ten years be tidily divided into four roughly equal parts, consisting of 1800-35, 1835-57, 1857-85, and 1885-1910? Das devotes some rather awkward pages toward the end of his prologue to a section on "Periodization," where he defends these divisions from the objection of arbitrariness. As he admits concerning his starting-point, "the nature of literary activity throughout India as it was before 1800 did not change substantially even after fifty years in most parts of the country" (Das, *A History* 17). As for the divisions within his volume, he adduces an almost random set of historical and literary events in the supposedly pivotal years 1835, 1857, and 1885. Apart from the obvious candidate of 1857, these explanations hardly seem satisfying, and even with 1857 Das seems reluctant to give pride of place to politics. He first describes 1857 as "the year when English education entered another phase of its history — three universities were founded in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras" (*A History* 18); only then does he allude to the tumultuous events of the time.

Defending his choice of periodization with specific literary and historical markers, Das nowhere allows that his volume as a whole rather closely tracks "the long nineteenth century" as understood in England, beginning in the year of Wordsworth's famous preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads*, often taken as inaugurating the Romantic period in England, and ending in 1910 at the close of the Georgian era, in the very year when, as Virginia Woolf famously claimed, "human character changed" and modernism could take center stage. So too, the fourfold subdivision within the volume echoes the deeply ingrained Winckelmannian adaptation of the Four Ages of Man, now read out as a four-generational sequence, as though a large number of major Indian writers began publishing in 1800, gave birth to a new generation in 1835, welcomed the birth of their literary grandchildren in 1857, and fondly planned a massive book party for their great-grandchildren in 1885. Winckelmannian classicism may well stand fairly directly in the background of Das's approach, in fact. A product of Anglo-Indian education during the late colonial period, Das was particularly drawn to classical Greek culture, and he was a distinguished translator of Sophocles and Euripides from Greek into Hindi.

Das, then, gave coherence to the welter of his materials by the double imposition of a personal theory of cultural change set within an imported European chronological frame. I note this fact with a rather rueful interest, because those of us now working on *Literature: A World History* have been unable to avoid reproducing this same four-era framework ourselves. Our volumes are arranged in four broad historical periods (beginnings to 200 CE; 200-1500; 1500-1800; and 1800 to the present) whose outlines closely track the usual European division of Western history into the ancient, medieval, early modern, and modern eras. We made some minimal adjustments of the chronological frame in light of worldwide patterns: our volume on antiquity, for instance, ends in 200 CE, which can be identified as approximating the end of China's Han Dynasty in 220 rather than as an important date in the Western tradition. Even so, in opting for a transitional point of the year 200 rather than, say, the fall of the Roman Empire in 410, we have made a tokenistic adjustment that does not have any significant impact on our account of Western literature, since the end date of 200 still allows us the full set of classical writers up through Petronius and Apuleius. The only key Latin writer who is shifted into the second volume by this compromise is Augustine, who is not even a creative writer *stricto sensu*, and who can be presented in any case as a seminal figure for medieval literature. All of our volume divisions work well for Western literature, whereas each of the world's other regions is less well served by one or more of our points of division.

Our determinedly progressive and anti-Eurocentric literary history is thus still inflected in its deep structure by European norms, much as was Das's history twenty years ago; we have not found some solution that eluded him. At various points within our history, we find as well a comparable fourfold chronologic on view, applied to non-Western regions by scholars from those areas. Tang Dynasty literature, for instance, is divided (along well-established lines) into "early Tang," "high Tang," "middle Tang," and "late Tang." Similarly, the Chagatay literature of Central Asia is divided into a pre-Classical period (1300-1450), a Classical Period (1450-1500), and a post-Classical Period (1500-1900), prior to its decline and then suppression by the Soviets in the twentieth century. In the Chagatay case, it will

be noted too how neatly these subdivisions fit into centuries and half-centuries according to the Western calendar, a time scheme foreign to the Muslim region itself, in which "year 1" is reckoned from the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca to Medina rather than from the birth of Christ.

What the cases examined here make clear is that all historians need to be aware that the deep structure of historical logics can prove remarkably resistant to changing perspectives and may silently diminish the force of even the most well-intentioned revisionary projects. Perhaps the best image of the persistence of the old macro-historical template is offered by Marco Polo's account of Diomira, the first "invisible city" he describes to the emperor Kublai Khan in Italo Calvino's great fiction. Diomira is the first of five cities included under the category of "Cities and Memory" and in the streets of Diomira a visitor will find structures embodying Ovid's Four Ages of Man, from a golden cock high upon a tower down to leaden streets below the traveler's feet. The symbolic metals are not seen in order, however: the sequence persists as a hidden pattern, invisible to the ordinary eye, needing to be teased out by an attentive observer. Like Hesiod, Calvino interleaves a fifth element among the traditional four, but in place of Hesiod's striving heroes, he offers a crystal theater, perfect image of a structure that invites reflection rather than imposing its own shadow upon the scene. A literary historian could do worse than follow in Marco Polo's self-reflective wake:

Partendosi di là e andando tre giornate verso levante, l'uomo si trova a Diomira, città con sessanta cupole d'argento, statue in bronzo di tutti gli dei, vie lastricate in stagno, un teatro di cristallo, un gallo d'oro che canta ogni mattina su una torre. Tutte queste bellezze il viaggiatore già conosce per averle viste anche in altre città. Ma la proprietà di questa è che chi vi arriva una sera di settembre, quando le giornate s'accorciano e le lampade multicolori s'accendono tutte insieme sulle porte delle friggitorie, e da una terrazza una voce di donna grida: uh!, gli viene da invidiare quelli che ora pensano d'aver già vissuto una sera uguale a questa e d'esser state quella volta felici. (Calvino, *Le città 7*)

Leaving there and proceeding for three days toward the east, you reach Diomira, a city with sixty silver domes, bronze statues of all the gods, streets paved with lead, a crystal theater, a golden cock that crows each morning on a tower. All these beauties will already be familiar to the visitor, who has seen them also in other cities. But the special quality of this city for the man who arrives there on a September evening, when the days are growing shorter and the multicolored lamps are lighted all at once at the doors of the food stalls and from a terrace a woman's voice cries ooh!, is that he feels envy toward those who now believe they have once before lived an evening identical to this and who think they were happy, that time. (Calvino, *Invisible 7*)

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