Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature

Volume 9
Number 2 *Fall 2011*

Article 3

Fall 2011

Review of Sanjay Krishnan, Reading the Global: Troubling Perspectives on Britain's Empire in Asia.

Simona Sawhney
University of Minnesota

Sanjay Krishnan, *Reading the Global: Troubling Perspectives on Britain's Empire in Asia*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007. 256 pp. ISBN 9780231140706.

Reviewed by Simona Sawhney, University of Minnesota

Literary Reading in the Age of the Global

Michel Foucault's work takes shape in resistance to the enduring power of what he calls "total history." In the Introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (originally published as *L' Archéologie du Savoir* in 1969), Foucault describes "total history" thus: "The project of a total history is one that seeks to reconstitute the overall form of a civilization, the principle—material or spiritual—of a society, the significance common to all the phenomena of a period, the law that accounts for their cohesion . . . " [1] Such a project, he claims, depends on a few fundamental hypotheses: that it is possible to find relations of causality or expressivity among all the events in a defined spatio-temporal locus; that history becomes manifest as a succession of internally cohesive stages; and that all the structures—economic, social, political—of a given period are subject to "the same form of historicity" (10). Central to Foucault's concern, here and elsewhere, is the unquestioned shape and trajectory of time in total history; a trajectory that, according to him, seems most deeply implicated in the history of thought: "It is as if it was particularly difficult, in the history in which men retrace their own ideas and their own knowledge, to formulate a general theory of discontinuity [. . . . .] As if we were afraid to conceive of the *Other* in the time of our own thought" (12).

What does this mean? Let us start by stating the obvious. If Foucault specifically draws our attention to an other in the *time* of our thought, this would not be a cultural or political other, but a temporal other. It would perhaps be another time, a time that may not move synchronically and progressively, or perhaps even an other *of* "time," an other that already lives in the time of our own thought but whose mark or trace we attempt to repress. Freud, in trying to conceive of the "Other in the time of our own thought" gave this other the name of the unconscious or the id, at one instance writing "There is nothing in the id that corresponds to the idea of time; there is no recognition of the passage of time, and—a thing that is most remarkable and awaits consideration in philosophical thought—no alteration in its mental processes is produced by the passage of time." [2] When Freud and later Foucault draw attention to the other of/in time, they are, as we know, interested in calling into question the sovereignty of consciousness, and of the subject who is the privileged proprietor of this consciousness. Thus, in challenging (Hegelian) total history Foucault states unambiguously, "Continuous history is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject . . . . Making historical analysis the discourse of the continuous and making human consciousness the original subject of all historical development and all action are the two sides of the same system of thought" (12). Foucault thus suggests that the "discourse of the continuous" arises to prop up, as it were, this subject, for whom time must gather all events and phenomena in a homogeneous stream in order to allow it to appropriate the world as object, or, we might say, as picture.

This becomes very clear elsewhere, when Foucault discusses the emergence of a "will to know" that distributes the complementary dyad of object and subject: "To go back a little further: at the turn of the sixteenth century (and particularly in England), there appeared a will to know which,

anticipating its actual contents, sketched out schemes of possible, observable, measurable, classifiable objects; a will to know which imposed on the knowing subject, and in some sense prior to all experience, a certain position, a certain gaze and a certain function." [3] Foucault's assertion here, in particular his emphasis on the assignation of a "certain position" and a "certain gaze," comes close to some of Heidegger's statements, especially in the essay "The Age of the World Picture"—the essay that provides the inaugural frame for Sanjay Krishnan's recent book *Reading the Global: Troubling Perspectives on Britain's Empire in Asia*. Heidegger, in this frequently cited essay, tries to approach the essence of modern science as a way to understand the specificity of the modern age. He argues that the transformation of science into research is a decisive and fundamentally significant event. This transformation and the concomitant centrality of research as paradigm and method in modernity signify, first and foremost, a prior apprehension of the world as representable, as picture: "Knowing, as research, calls whatever is to account with regard to the way in which and the extent to which it lets itself be put at the disposal of representation." [4] And a little later, "Hence world picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world, but the world conceived and grasped as a picture. What is, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first is in being and only is in being to the extent that it is set up by man, who represents and sets forth" (129-130). In other words, the very being of the world becomes, at a certain historical point, a function of its representability.

Precisely this question of representation and of the gaze that brings the world—as world—into view is central to Krishnan's investigation. This is how the book begins: "In this book I study 'the global' as an instituted perspective, not as an empirical process. The term 'global' describes a way of bringing into view the world as a single, unified entity, articulated in space and developing over (common) time" (1). The "global" thus shares a partial affinity with Foucault's "total history"; hence we may read Krishnan as implying that the phenomenon called globalization, so often studied in terms of empirical events, flows and movements, should instead be grasped as intrinsically related to a *theoretical* stance, taking into account the early sense of theory as viewing or contemplation. Krishnan's project, like Foucault's, is to question the "naturalization of this frame": "My argument challenges the ways in which the 'global' has been uncritically assimilated, in the humanities and social sciences, to a transparent comprehension of the world" (1). But unlike Foucault, who sought to contest total history by presenting a new method and style—indeed, an entire set of new questions and objectives—Krishnan proposes something more modest, something that cannot take the form of a total rejection of "total" history. [5] The global, he argues, cannot be simply rejected or overcome. But it can be interrupted. The heterogeneity that the global as perspective necessarily and often forcefully suppresses can be highlighted and, to use a central term in Krishnan's argument, activated. It is in this context that the significance of "reading" in the book's title "Reading the Global" emerges. Most simply put, to read the global is to remain attentive to how the global constitutes and presents itself *as* the global; reading "attends to the matter of representation" (5). Following a strong poststructuralist model, "reading" signals in Krishnan's book a way of critically annotating the movements by which text is assembled, and hence resisting the attraction of "language-as-communication." It involves deliberately moving away from the position to which the reader is ushered by the loudest or most seductive voice in the text; it involves renouncing the most comfortable chair, the one clearly labeled "You, Reader," and instead walking around, trying to hear while squatting in a musty corner or crouching behind a curtained recess. Reading is a critical practice, and

Krishnan's contention is that it can "make the global respond to perspectives that are suppressed or invalidated by its overt claims but activated through its manner of representation" (14).

In the four chapters of the book, Krishnan proceeds to demonstrate this contention with admirable care, creativity, and skill. His geographical focus is on the Malay Archipelago, which appeared on the map of the global as a commercial zone linking India and China. Because of its geopolitical significance for the British Empire, and because it has been home to several intermingling communities over the centuries (thus challenging implicitly the founding premises of "nationalism" or nation-hood), it provides, Krishnan claims, a particularly strong example of both the discursive power of the global, and the various manners in which it may be contested. The book's first chapter, a brilliant reading of Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), directly confronts Smith's attempt to imagine an ethical and natural empire. In arguing against the rapacious effects of mercantile capitalism, Smith calls for a more responsible capitalism that would align itself with natural and subsistence economies.

What interests Krishnan is precisely the text's reliance on the figure of subsistence. By drawing attention to the figure, rather than the concept, of subsistence, Krishnan wants us to notice all the rhetorical charge—the moral and political energy—accumulated by this term in this particular text. Thus, although Smith's narrative ostensibly turns to "subsistence" only to make a case for the moral right of free trade (free trade as an extension of subsistence economies), Krishnan demonstrates that once the figure is put into play it inadvertently begins to inflect the argument, generating "unexpected and wayward" effects. It implicitly calls the reader's attention to those "formidably diverse economies in which the disembedded or self-regulating market is not in place" (43). Krishnan's aim is to reveal, here and elsewhere, how a text's strategies of persuasion may also turn against it, in the ears of a capable reader. In Smith's work, free trade must, in effect, justify itself in terms of a moral code that both precedes and, more significantly, challenges free trade's own implicit conceptions of economy, work, exchange, and, indeed, life. This internal unease in the narrative in fact brings into view the very economies that free trade wishes to surpass and erase. The following chapters all follow a similarly structured argument: in each case, Krishnan focuses on a figure that the text marginalizes or suppresses in order to probe how the very act of subordination invests with a certain energy that which is inimical to the global perspective. What makes Krishnan's approach distinct from any number of literary studies that read a text "against the grain" or seek to recuperate the perspectives of marginalized or even absent characters is his focus on conceptual (rather than strictly human) figures. This is what gives the argument unusual density and weight. Chapter Two thus examines the tension between the trajectories and implications of opium as commodity and as narcotic in De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821); Chapter Three on Abdullah bin Abdul Kadir's attempt in *Hikayat Abdullah* (1849) to replicate the global perspective in a pedagogic mode and those textual elements which interrupt or question this perspective; and Chapter Four on the figure of the animal in Conrad's *Lord Jim* and its potential sabotage of the novel's ethico-imperial perspective.

As I read the book, it seems to draw upon three related but distinct intellectual arguments: a post-Marxist critique of historicism; an insistence on the materiality and non-transparence of language (most often associated with structuralism and its heirs); and a postcolonial critique of European colonial capitalism and the epistemological categories it nourished. The last of these three

invigorates the other two with new political vitality, so that the stakes of the critique of historicism, for instance, become more sharply evident. As Krishnan notes in his introduction, "The global therefore is not just a peculiar mode of thematization: it is aligned to a conception of historical development unique to European colonial capitalism" (16). It is not simply imperialism, but specifically *capitalist* imperialism, according to Krishnan, that is most invested in the global, read now as the normalization and the complex propagation of the dominant perspective. Krishnan's project is thus in many ways related to Dipesh Chakrabarty's in *Provincializing Europe*—in terms of its critique of historicism as well as its attempt to think Marx and Heidegger together from a postcolonial position. Indeed, Krishnan's concerns and moves often seem so close to Chakrabarty's that one wishes he had engaged in a more overt and detailed manner with Chakrabarty's argument. Krishnan refers to *Provincializing Europe* only once in his entire book—in the very last endnote, where he registers a significant distinction between his and Chakrabarty's reading of a much-cited passage from Nehru's *Discovery of India*. But the larger implications of this distinction are not spelt out in a comprehensive manner, and certain similarities still appear striking. Though a thorough comparison is not warranted here, let me briefly give an example that points toward a recurring confluence. In discussing the alternative perspectives that speak through *Hikayat Abdullah*, Krishnan writes that "Abdullah's father's protest need not be read condescendingly—as an older way of life that must be overcome—and is instead activated in an interruptive and supplementary relation to the dominant colonial order" (121). Is not the relationship posited here between the father's protest and the dominant order structurally akin to the relationship Chakrabarty describes between what he calls History 1 and History 2? [6]

Referring to Marx's writings on history, and primarily *Theories of Surplus Value*, Chakrabarty proposes that this work identifies two different kinds of history. History 1 would be the past "posited by capital itself as its precondition" (63)—a narrative of the past that *presumes* a teleology leading to the capitalist mode of production. However, antecedant to capital are also other relationships and elements that do not contribute to this narrative and cannot be claimed as part of capital's own biography, so to speak. Leaving aside for the moment the intriguing examples of History 2 discussed by Marx, let me focus on Chakrabarty's rhetoric (the "matter of representation") as he describes the function and role of History 2: "History 2s are thus not pasts separate from capital; they inhere in capital and yet interrupt and punctuate the run of capital's own logic" (64); "History 2 is better thought of as a category charged with the function of constantly interrupting the totalizing thrusts of History 1" (66). To quickly summarize my claim: "reading," in Krishnan's argument, is surely close to "History 2" in Chakrabarty's. Yet they are not identical.

If we juxtapose the two texts, we could imagine at least part of Krishnan's possible response to Chakrabarty. Let us recall Chakrabarty's own description of his quest: "I ask for a history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices . . ." (45). If I read Krishnan's argument correctly, his response, in a nutshell, would be the following: all texts necessarily expose their repressive strategies, albeit in ambiguous or ambivalent ways, and the task of reading is precisely to attend to such moments of exposure. Thus, we could say that whereas History 2 refers to what we may call subaltern histories, "reading" refers, not to a substantive series, but rather to a practice. Yet, as Krishnan describes it, it remains a practice predicated on the *recognition* of the claims of the subaltern.

Krishnan's emphasis on reading, rich and productive as it is, then raises for me two related questions. Let me attempt to articulate them here as coherently as I can. First, Krishnan's analysis of the global seems to oscillate between two somewhat different formulations: the global at times seems to be a specific ideology, the ideology of colonial capitalism that equips capitalism with moral, ethical, political, and aesthetic qualities. As Krishnan notes, "The emergence of a global perspective coincides with a new kind of territorial and commercial empire in Asia and a new ideology of imperial governance based at once on greater formal state control and free trade" (18); correlatively, at several moments, it seems clear that the interruption of the global is synonymous with the interruption of a "normative Eurocentric framework" (121). But at other times, the global is simply the dominant *narrative* perspective in a text, as for instance Marlow's in *Lord Jim*. Krishnan's attempt in the chapter on *Lord Jim* is thus to bring to focus the means by which "Marlow's voice is interrupted and pluralized, for although he is the one who speaks, we are not always obliged to see through his eyes" (149). This double or twin assignation of the global need not be read as a contradiction or even a problem. Indeed, we could quite easily conclude that Krishnan is interested precisely in demonstrating that the ideology of colonial capitalism, as the dominant ideology of modernity, appears in several powerful works—whether European or non-European—*as* the dominant narrative voice; that this narrative voice becomes, so to speak, the representative, or at the very least, the ally, of the dominant ideology. But this is not quite what Krishnan says, for such a deterministic proposition would imply a stronger base/superstructure division than would be compatible with his larger frame and conceptual method. It seems to me, therefore, that the relation between these two senses of global—as ideology and narrative investment—deserved more rigorous theoretical attention. The closest Krishnan comes to articulating this relation is when he writes, toward the end of the book, "In this book I have argued that the matter of representation serves as an *allegory* of a historicity that situates or encompasses the mode of perspectivizing in which global histories are produced, and that it is precisely by means of representation's interruptive potential that it begins to acknowledge the complexity of the world in which we live" (166; emphasis mine). At the very least, it would have been helpful to spell out more distinctly what the word "allegory" means here. To clarify: my central question here concerns the methodological frame of Krishnan's argument, which seems to be more "Marxist" than is acknowledged. So I would have liked to see either a more clear theoretical exposition of why Krishnan's analysis cannot be assimilated to a Marxist frame, or a more overt commitment to, and exploration of, precisely that frame.

The second question is related. Krishnan invites us to think of the global as a text—and by implication, to think of ideology itself as a text. This is evident, not only in the significance accorded to "reading," but also in some salient descriptive statements: ". . . the global denotes both the frame that makes such heterogeneity visible and the heterogeneity by which that frame is exceeded or displaced" (49). This is also what allows him to make a case for the significance of textual analysis and literary study—that is indeed a strong theme running through the book. In thinking about the task for literary study in the "age of globalization," Krishnan proposes that attentiveness to rhetorical movement exhibits how perspectives and values are naturalized; what literature can teach best, Krishnan reminds us, is "loosening the ways in which . . . a perspective is dissimulated as sight" (167). Implicit in such moves is a questioning of social scientific approaches to the question and theme of the "global." All this I find persuasive and timely. I continue, however, to be troubled by a question that precedes my reading of this book, but to which the book once again turns my attention. As a teacher of literature, it is a question that has

often occupied me, especially in a world where, as Krishnan's book demonstrates so skillfully, the "dominant" perspective (of colonial capitalism and Eurocentric knowledge production) has been rendered so thoroughly habitual and "natural." My question is the following: though students of literature can perhaps be trained to approach texts by way of a "defamiliarizing engagement" (22), what sort of education could teach them *to want to* "activate" the perspectives, signals, and figures that have been suppressed or rendered subordinate? To put it most bluntly, wouldn't one first need to be convinced of the necessity of a resistant political stance in order to read "against the grain"? Is it the task of literary study to inculcate such politics, and can it ever be equipped to do so? I find intriguing here Krishnan's recourse to the figure of "cultivation" in his own descriptions of the task of literary study: "A modest task that literary or cultural study in the era of globalization can set itself is *to cultivate* critical reflexes that actively interrupt the global perspective" (14; emphasis mine). How may we articulate the theoretical or conceptual relation between a critical practice of close reading on the one hand and such cultivation on the other? These seem to me to be complex but crucial questions that any defense of literary study—or indeed, any attempt to rethink the discipline anew—must address. After all, the aim of much "progressive" literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was precisely to open paths by which privileged readers could "identify" with the perspectives, lives, and troubles of those who experienced the world as a place of sharper scarcity and deprivation. The inculcation of sympathy and the affective teaching of outrage were thus political "justifications" for reading literature. Now that "literature" as a category itself seems a relic, and identification appears as the ruse of an exploitative ideology, we perhaps still await a theoretically and politically persuasive defense of literary study. My sense is that such a defense may proceed more productively if it conceives of literary study as being, from the outset, in a creative and new alliance with the social sciences—even an *antagonistic* alliance, if such a thing were possible—rather than in a relation of mutual distrust.

Notes

[1] Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 9.

[2] Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1965), 66.

[3] Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse" in Robert Young, ed. *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reade*r (London and New York: Routledge Kegan and Paul), 55.

[4] Martin Heidegger, "The Age of the World Picture" in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1977), 126.

[5] I am indebted to Ajay Skaria for this observation.

[6] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Two Histories of Capital" in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 47-71.