

THINKING LITERATURE ACROSS CONTINENTS

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BOOK REVIEW

Thinking literature across continents, by Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller, Durham and London, Duke University Press, 2016, 316 pp., \$94.95 (hardback), ISBN 978 0 8223 6154 1

In the title of Ranjan Ghosh and J. Hillis Miller's *Thinking Literature across Continents*, the preposition "across" stands out as the key to reading and comprehending this atypical volume. Both the function and the meaning of "across" indeed turn out to provide clues to the authors' original insights into literature. As a preposition, the word suggests a connection between itself and another item, a connection that is likewise expressed – as Ghosh also notes (3) – by the noun "cross", on which "across" is etymologically based. As regards semantics, "across" indicates a movement from one side to another. Hence this word perfectly captures the spirit of Ghosh and Miller's project: the book brings together two scholars who come from different continents – Asia and America – but also from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds, who hold dissimilar opinions, but who are linked by a common interest in literature. Put differently, literature is their meeting point.

"Across" is, moreover, echoed in the dialogical structure of *Thinking Literature across Continents* (3). Throughout the book, each scholar shares his own views on five main issues: "The Matter and Mattering of Literature", "Poem and Poetry", "Literature and the World", "Teaching Literature" and "Ethics and Literature". The authors' conceptions of and approaches to literature, articulated in their respective chapters under these headings, emerge at first glance as strikingly different. On the one hand, Ghosh relies upon the notion of "across" to build his reading of literature, an approach which he calls "(in)fusion" (4). In his own words, (in)fusion "has a deep tendency to go across, crisscross, find the crossed point of delicate intersections" (5). It is thus no wonder that Ghosh's sections "walk across thoughts, between ideas from a variety of cultures and traditions, making for an experience of literature that is diffractive, mostly, out of time, in the whirl of the 'now'" (5). Indeed, in his wide-ranging explorations of literature, he quotes Michel Serres and Gilles Deleuze, along with Confucius and Rabindranath Tagore, and makes references to the Latin, Greek, Sanskrit and French languages, among others. Miller, on the other hand, stresses that the theory of literature developed in his parts of the volume is subjective; that is, it is seen as acceptable by its author only. Miller in fact writes about literature in a less formal manner, interspersing his arguments and textual analyses of Wallace Stevens's "The Motive for Metaphor" or Anthony Trollope's *Framley Parsonage* with personal anecdotes and memories. Miller is furthermore interested in the future of literature in an increasingly digitalized world.

Surprisingly enough, and as Miller himself points out, “an unexpected consonance between [their] two views of literature ultimately emerges” (45). This book invites readers not only to reflect on the subject “literature” and on why it may (not) matter to them today, but also to “listen” to and “discover” those who support contrasting views, to be “tolerant”, as these readers are likely to share more than they might believe (259–261). This can explain why, despite the authors’ different positions, the term “literature” found in the title of their volume remains in its singular form.