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Working Conditions

World Literary Criticism and the Material of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra

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ABSTRACT: To what extent does cultural distance interfere with or limit literary experience? What kind of intimacy is needed to make a text into a work? This essay seeks to answer these questions by focusing on the writings of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra. In doing so, it suggests that the challenges of cultural distance may be most acute when dealing with texts from homo-linguistic literary environments, and that we might overcome these challenges by undertaking a world literary criticism that attends to localized fields and materials without forgetting the charge of particular works.

KEYWORDS: the Beats; Kabir; literary material; literary field; print culture; literary experience; Theodor Adorno

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What are the conditions of contemporary literary experience? What are its limits? In posing these questions, I have in mind the account that Derek Attridge gives of readings in which texts become works.¹ I have in mind also the particular challenges posed by an expanded literary totality which is roughly equivalent with ‘world literature’ as the term is used today. It is the task of this essay to explore these questions by tracking my own responses to the writings of a single author, Arvind Krishna Mehrotra; and of

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1 This account is elaborated over several books, but I rely especially on Derek Attridge, *The Work of Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

its introductory section to expand on what I have in mind when asking them.²

I

In his account of literary experience, Attridge describes acts of reading which convert texts into works, or, rather, which make them work. Whether a text can be made to work depends on what is activated in reading, and specifically on the reader's encounter with otherness, which entails a modification of one 'idioculture' (a way of speaking and thinking) by another.³ Which is not to say that all texts are amenable to such activation, or that any reading practice is capable of it. From the perspective of the reader, the text must be somehow distinctive, unknown. To use Attridge's terms, it must be creative and above all inventive. But difference is not enough — in the act of reading, a dialectic of proximity and distance unfolds. The text must first appear in a legible medium, language, script, form, and genre, even as it modifies some or all of these.

The bar to this kind of literary encounter is high but surmountable, and while they must be largely unpredictable, such experiences are by no means uncommon. Nor

2 In our Introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Ben Etherington and I explore 'world literature' as only one of many conceptions of literary totality, and pose questions about its value through a reading of Mehrotra's verse. The project of a world literary criticism is fundamentally indebted to this collaboration, and to its previous and subsequent articulations, especially in Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimble, 'Field, Material, Technique: On Renewing Postcolonial Literary Criticism', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 49.3 (2014), pp. 279–98, and Ben Etherington, 'World Literature as a Speculative Literary Totality: Veselovsky, Auerbach, Said, and the Critical Humanist Tradition', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 82.2 (2021).

3 Attridge, *The Work of Literature*, pp. 60–62.

are they the preserve of literary critics. For Attridge, they depend on the reader's 'willingness to be surprised' and her 'effort to clear the mind of preconceptions.'⁴ Yet legibility — and especially the legibility of inventive texts — will depend also on a training, both informal and formal, that begins in early childhood, and endows readers with the requisite linguistic capabilities, as well as the appropriate disposition and practical knowledge, including knowledge of the conventions of specific media and forms.

As for the text's *workability*, this demands still more: familiarity with the histories of these conventions, and with what is practically possible; though quite how much familiarity is a matter of debate. According to Attridge, a responsible reading, which will do justice to the text's inventiveness, is one that 'brings to bear on the work all the relevant cultural resources available to the reader.'⁵ But which resources will be relevant? Although concerned not with inventiveness but with truth-content, Theodor Adorno's position seems pertinent: a text's workability depends on its own, and by implication its readers', embeddedness in what he calls the material.⁶ As Ben Etherington has explained, what Adorno means by the material is anything that the artist has to hand in making, which is not *anything at all*, but anything that can in fact be utilized for artistic expression.⁷ Of necessity, this changes over time: a

4 Ibid., p. 190.

5 Ibid., p. 191.

6 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedermann, trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 194. For Attridge's reflection on the distinction between inventiveness and truth-content, see *The Work of Literature*, pp. 82–83.

7 Ben Etherington, 'What Is Materialism's Material? Thoughts toward (Actually against) a Materialism for "World Literature"', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48.5 (2012), pp. 539–51. At the minimum, 'artistic expression' entails labour undertaken in what Henry Staten describes

technique, genre, or medium can be worn out as much as a subject-matter, banalized by the passage of time, emptied of meaning, and even of the potential for meaning. What an artist has to hand in making, then, is not the sum total of all media, forms, genres, techniques, subject matters, but only those which remain, or which have become again, alive to the touch, instinct with the spirit.

In Adorno's sense, then, the material may be conceived as the horizon of possibilities and expectations that, in each moment, determines aesthetic judgement, decision-making, and experience, as well as the capacity of literary works to convey their truths. Attridge's account is by no means aligned with Adorno's, but there are certainly moments of congruence. In describing the artist's idioculture, Attridge says it will incorporate 'the appropriate *techne* governing, and providing resources for, the art form in question', which, 'in conjunction with the physical matter specific to the particular art form, constitutes the material out of which the artist creates the work'. This congruence persists even in Attridge's important qualification: 'in all the arts, the material possibilities and limitations are significant only to the extent that the artist understands — or, more often, perhaps, discovers in practice — what can be done with them', since, in Adorno's sense, the material is precisely that which is discovered in practice.⁸

Is the same true for the reader? Will the material possibilities and limitations conditioning a work be significant only insofar as they are understood? If so, the question of relevant cultural resources returns in a different form:

as 'the realm of the "well done"', and which is subject to the given art's 'techne limit', its canons of correctness. See Henry Staten, *Techne Theory: A New Language for Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2019), pp. 17–22 and 36–43.

8 Attridge, *The Work of Literature*, pp. 183–84.

how much must we appreciate of these possibilities and limitations in order for a text to be workable? Must text and reader be mutually embedded in the material? If so, how do we account for literary experiences of texts that arrive from beyond those domains that we inhabit and in which we easily move about? The question seems not to arise for Adorno, but it certainly troubles Attridge, who helpfully distinguishes between historical and cultural distance.

With regard to historically distant texts, one answer may be that, since the material itself, as an agglomeration of decisive decisions, is historical through-and-through, and since literary education has for centuries entailed exposure to significant authorships and practices, a proportion will remain workable without any noticeable effort on the part of readers. There are, however, two qualifications: first, not all practices enter lastingly into the material; second, it may be possible to reanimate practices that have expired by reconstructing their horizons of expectation and possibility. Attridge is sceptical of 'archaeological' literary criticism, and especially of the notion that research might allow us to inhabit the perspectives of historically distant readers.⁹ 'Reading a literary work with an openness to its singularity', he says, 'is not, clearly, an exercise in historical reconstruction.'¹⁰ All the same, if one does happen to be a literary scholar, the nature of one's responsibility to a text surely changes, and while an experience of inventiveness may not always require the recovery of a text's originality, without such a recovery certain texts will remain wholly unworkable. Indeed, Attridge's own research into Elizabethan quantitative metres is a powerful example of how critics might provide the means for others to attune

9 Ibid., p. 17.

10 Ibid., p. 194.

themselves to a very different set of aesthetic conditions.¹¹ This does not mean they will encounter Edmund Spenser's quantitative verse in the manner of his original readers, but only that, through acts of scholarship, deadened texts may be reanimated.

What then does one do with texts that are *culturally* distant? Practically speaking, the fact of a text's legibility means that it has already been somewhat domesticated. If it originates in an alien linguistic environment, this domestication is achieved chiefly through translation, though there are also editorial and bibliographic processes that give the text a familiar appearance, making it look, feel and read as if it were like others published in our language and time.¹² But translation may be responsible for more than domestication: depending on the manner in which it responds to the target literary culture's codes and conventions, it may ensure that an otherwise unworkable text becomes available for literary experience.¹³ When thinking about the problem of cultural distance, it is therefore

11 See Derek Attridge, *Well-Weighed Syllables: Elizabethan Verse in Classical Metres* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974).

12 I use 'domestication' here to refer to processes by which an illegible object becomes a legible text, and is thereafter available for literary experience. The term is used in a narrower sense by Lawrence Venuti to describe a translation practice that aims at fluency and invisibility, and which he contrasts with a 'foreignizing practice' that registers 'the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text'. Although he favours the latter, Venuti acknowledges that, in order to carry the text across a threshold of legibility, all translation necessarily involves some degree of domestication. See Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp. 12–16.

13 This may be the case with Alaa al-Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building*, the text through which Attridge examines cultural distance in *The Work of Literature* (pp. 211–18). If the experiences of readers of the Arabic and of the English texts are so different, this is perhaps because the translation is somehow more responsive to the demands of inventiveness than the original.

worthwhile considering texts whose legibility does *not* depend on translation, because they originate in literary cultures which are distinct, but which make use of a language that is, in a general sense, our own (and which might therefore be described as ‘homo-linguistic’).¹⁴ In being both familiar and strange, our own and yet other, such texts reveal more clearly the strains of reading across literary cultures. In so doing, they allow us to make explicit the kind of knowledge that conditions literary experience, and ask us to think carefully about our capacity for making texts work: about where this capacity comes from and how it can be developed; and about the resources that we activate in writing, and in reading, and in writing about reading. In short, such texts clarify what is at stake for any critical practice that aspires to be something like a world literary criticism.

It is here that I turn to Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, considering his own verse as well as his translations, and how, for non-Indian anglophone readers, a dialectic of proximity and distance unfolds across these texts.

II

Born in Lahore in 1947, Mehrotra has lived most his life in Allahabad. Abroad, he is best known for *Songs of Kabir*, a volume of translations published in 2011 in the New York Review of Books (NYRB) Classics series, the success of which has led to a selection of his poetry appearing in

14 As Attridge argues in [this volume](#), the belief that a single language is shared by a great variety of speech communities relies on a widespread but inadequate notion of what a language is. In light of this inadequacy, we might understand ‘homo-linguistic’ literary cultures simply as those amongst which legibility does not depend on translation, so long as we also keep in mind that the threshold of legibility is by no means fixed.

the NYRB Poets series. Advertising the latter, the NYRB website states that ‘until now his work has rarely been available in the United States and Britain’, whilst assuring us that ‘Mehrotra’s poetry [...] reflects an intense and original engagement with American poetry, especially the work of William Carlos Williams and the Beats’.¹⁵

This characterization contributes to the kind of domestication that I describe in the previous section: it makes Mehrotra legible for British and American readers by relating him to recognizable metropolitan poets. But it is not without justification. Throughout his career, Mehrotra has seemed to enact with enthusiasm what we might describe as a cosmopolitan disposition. He reflects in a recent essay that he had, from the outset, taken his ‘bearings from distant stars’, and though he here specifies ‘e. e. cummings and Kahlil Gibran’,¹⁶ he elsewhere notes the impact of first reading *Penguin Modern Poets 5*, which appeared in 1963 and included poems by Gregory Corso, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and Allen Ginsberg.¹⁷

Songs of Kabir itself clearly signals Mehrotra’s cosmopolitanism. For in translating ‘the most outspoken’ of the medieval Indian *bhakti* poets, whose performances mocked at pieties of caste, class, religion, and also language and script, Mehrotra follows a well-trodden

15 ‘Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Selected Poems and Translations*’, *New York Review of Books* <<https://www.nyrb.com/products/arvind-krishna-mehrotra>> [accessed 8 November 2019].

16 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ‘Introduction’, *A History of Indian Literature in English*, ed. by Arvind Krishna Mehrotra (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 26.

17 Laetitia Zecchini, “‘We Were Like Cartographers, Mapping the City’: An Interview with Arvind Krishna Mehrotra”, *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 52.1–2 (2017), pp. 190–206 (p. 191).

path.¹⁸ Ezra Pound tried his hand at the beginning of the twentieth century, in a collaboration with Kali Mohan Ghose;¹⁹ Rabindranath Tagore published his *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* in 1915, two years after his Nobel Prize in Literature;²⁰ and Robert Bly worked with Tagore's translations to produce his own versions in 1971.²¹

No less important, Mehrotra's translations seem to go out of their way to meet British and American readers on familiar linguistic and aesthetic territory. We can see this in his version of KG 179:²²

It take a man that have the blues so to sing the blues.
— Leadbelly

O pundit, your hairsplitting's
So much bullshit. I'm surprised
You still get away with it.

If parroting the name
Of Rama brought salvation,
Then saying *sugarcane*
Should sweeten the mouth,
Saying *fire* burn the feet,
Saying *water* slake thirst,
And saying *food*
Would be as good as a belch.

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- 18 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Songs of Kabir* (New York: New York Review of Books, 2011), p. xxiii.
- 19 Kali Mohan Ghose and Ezra Pound, 'Certain Poems of Kabir', *The Modern Review*, 13.6 (1913), pp. 611–13.
- 20 Rabindranath Tagore, *One Hundred Poems of Kabir* (London: Macmillan, 1915).
- 21 Robert Bly, *The Fish in the Sea is Not Thirsty: Kabir Versions* (Northwood Narrows, NH: Lillabulero Press, 1971). This was the first of several publications devoted to Bly's translations of Kabir.
- 22 Mehrotra, *Songs of Kabir*, p. 26. 'KG' here refers to Parasnath Tiwari's edited collection, *Kabir Granthavali* (Allahabad: Hindi Parisad, 1961), one of four source texts used by Mehrotra, though all but three of the *padas* he translates are from either this volume, or Mata Prasad Gupta's *Kabir Granthavali* (Allahabad: Lok Bharti Prakashan, 1969), identified by the acronym KGG.

If saying *money* made everyone rich,
 There'd be no beggars in the streets.
 My back is turned on the world,
 You hear me singing of Rama and you smile.
 One day, Kabir says,
 All bundled up,
 You'll be delivered to Deathville.

In the volume's Preface, Wendy Doniger notes that 'Mehrotra tries to push the poems as far as he can towards Americanese, in the direction of the language that comes most naturally to him', using 'Slang, neologisms, and anachronisms', to produce some of the 'shock-effect that upside-down language would have had upon Kabir's fifteenth-century audiences', and to 'say what cannot otherwise be said about god and caste and Hindu-Muslim conflict'.²³

As examples of what Doniger calls 'contemporary language' and 'colloquialism', she cites two words that appear in KG 179, *bullshit* and *Deathville*, to which we might add *getting away with it*, and *all bundled up*, as well as syntactic features, such as the contraction of *hairsplitting's*, *I'd*, *there'd*, and *you'll*, and the anachronistic Leadbelly epigraph. More than merely contemporary or colloquial, the language of the poem is tough, plain-speaking, and confrontational — effects achieved as much through lineation and prosody as through anaphora and rhyme. Breaks in the line mostly coincide with breaks in syntax, and where this is not the case enjambment is counteracted by some other feature. So, in the first verse paragraph, the cross-rhymes on *pundit*, *bullshit* and *with it* help to organize pauses consonant with the syntax. They also give the opening lines a punchiness felt on the lips and teeth.

23 Wendy Doniger, 'Preface', in Mehrotra, *Songs of Kabir*, pp. vi-xviii (pp. xvii-xviii).

The energy of these lines is all directed against the *pundit*, a loan-word which contributes to the colloquial contemporaneity of the poem, whilst indexing the language of Kabir's original, so that its sights are set both on the Brahmin scholar of Hinduism's sacred texts as well as on the talking heads, public professors, and media experts of our own moment. The distinctions without differences, the speech without significance, the portentous prognostications, and rebarbative retrospectives: all are dismissed as empty verbiage in lines whose identical rhymes give them bite, whilst communicating a disregard for aural decorum.

It is therefore appropriate that instead of the opening's relatively complex structure, the two verse paragraphs that follow are made of quite simple conditional sentences, in which the repetition is chiefly grammatical and semantic. Which is not to say that there are no surprises, for the object of scorn is not simply a bankrupted scholasticism, but a broader error about the nature of language, made by the poets and critics of today as much as by the clerics of the past, who forget the limited power of words.

Yet if the poem seems headed towards a familiar complaint about needing to do rather than say, it swerves sharply at the end. First, because the Kabir persona turns away from the world, preferring song to action. Second, because the punchiness of the opening returns in the final two lines, which curse the self-satisfied expert with a fate somehow worse than mere death. Being 'all bundled up' and 'delivered' recalls a mob kidnapping, and 'Deathville', in figuring humanity's end as some kind of townlet or suburban neighbourhood, associates the experience of death with a semi-permanent lingering on the edges of life.

But the word that delivers the final blow also identifies Kabir's singing with a particular group of mid-twentieth-century American poets. For *Deathville* — which translates *jmapuri*, meaning, literally, the town or city of Yama, the god of death and the underworld — belongs more obviously to American English of this earlier moment than to American English of the new millennium. The *OED* informs us that '-ville' is chiefly associated with American colloquial speech, especially of the 1930s through to the 1960s, and the *Dictionary of American Slang* confirms that, from the mid-fifties to the mid-sixties, the suffix was 'in wide bop and cool use', often designating a place or a state as uninteresting, as in '*Dullsville*', '*Hicksville*', and '*squaresville*'.

Deathville, then, seems to cast Kabir as a latter-day Beat, identifying his song with an irreverent counter-cultural poetic idiom steeped in a mysticism of bodily ravishment and a language of the everyday, if not of the banal and bathetic, though it is by no means the only source of this identification. Other of the poem's colloquialisms, *bullshit* and *get away with it*, had likewise been in use since at least the 1930s, and this kind of mid-century American flavouring is found across the whole of *Songs of Kabir*: 'Brother', 'figure it out' (KG 116); 'bedroom eyes', 'all hell breaks loose', 'get the story' (KG 138); 'shortchanging' (KG 93); 'cleaned out by thieves', 'best part of town', 'won't be pretty', 'Fearlessburg' (KG 170); 'punditry', 'Keep cool', 'Wipe the bootlicker's smile / Off your face' (KG 77); 'check out the place' (KG 29); 'smart guys', 'the only / Dimwit in town' (KGG 1.146); 'Load of crap', 'Deathville' (KGG 3.53); 'get a big head', 'Be street-smart', 'screw up your life' (KG 73); 'you blew it', 'sticky punk', 'Has you by the balls' (KG 60); 'Goners'

(KG 167); ‘Ended up on the couch’ (KG 2.23). Of course, few of these phrases are quite as precisely localized as ‘Deathville’, and Mehrotra’s colloquialisms are anyway as much grammatical as lexical. However, taken together with certain attitudes and themes, they all contribute to the impression that, among the several Kabirs emerging from Mehrotra’s volume, there is one who appears very much like a tough-talking, slang-relishing ‘subterranean’ American poet of the sixties, unafraid of the body’s urges and its frailty, intimate with sexuality, insanity, and death.

III

Mehrotra’s KG 179 seems to close the distances — cultural and historical — between talking heads and religious scholars, as well as between poet-mystics of medieval India and poet-mystics of mid-twentieth-century America. In this way, it domesticates Kabir for contemporary British and American readers, making his poetry newly workable,²⁴ and provides evidence of the kind of engagements that the NYRB website claims on Mehrotra’s behalf. As an act of translation that facilitates the passage of a canonical authorship whilst identifying itself with cosmopolitanism, it also gives support to recent theories of world literature that emphasize circulation, whether of texts, forms or genres.

However, this reading of KG 179 is unsettled by the history of Mehrotra’s interest in Kabir, which begins as early as 1967, but comes to fruition in 1970, when a selection of his translations appeared in *Vrishchik*, an Indian little magazine. Gathered under the heading ‘Recastings

24 In contrast, reading them today, Tagore’s translations strike me as distinctly unworkable.

from Kabir', they were accompanied by a note which confirms that, from the outset, Mehrotra intended his version of the *bhakti* poet to be confrontational and contemporary:

I hope there's a scholar/reviewer who is already snooping around these recastings, smacking his lips, all set for the kill. I hope someone rushes excitedly to Kabir's oeuvre and comes back with the headline: THESE DAMN THINGS DON'T EXIST THERE. In all probability they don't. Yet. Between Kabir and me stand five centuries, and any number of vulgar translations of his poetry – mainly Tagore's and Bankey Behari's. All these and more had to be melted, purified, and cast again. So Kabir began living in the nineteen seventies, I in the fourteen hundreds.²⁵

However, if the metallurgic metaphors explain Mehrotra's choice of heading, his insistence on Kabir's contemporaneity is somewhat belied by the poems themselves. Here is one, which, like KG 179, concerns itself with death's inevitability and lack of regard for rank and religiosity:

you be pauper or prince
 or the mendicant-saint,
 once you have come
 you must then end
 riding his throne
 one reaches the grave,
 the other is in irons bound
 and limps towards it²⁶

Moving decisively away from Tagore's odic lyricism, Mehrotra tends towards the epigrammatic. The verse is terse, an effect achieved by simplicity of diction and

25 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, 'Recastings from Kabir', *Vrishchik*, 1.11–12 (1970), pp. 4–6 (p. 6).

26 *Ibid.*

abbreviated two-beat lines, with line-breaks replacing the formalized caesurae of the printed Hindi *pad*. And yet the poem's lexicon as well as its syntax create an impression that Kabir belongs very much to the past: *pauper* and *mendicant* are antiquating, as are the inversion of verb and prepositional phrase in the penultimate line, and the use of *you be* rather than *whether you are* in the first clause. The impression is reinforced semantically, in references to iron bonds, royal litters, and princes.

In short, this Kabir is quite different from the one we encounter in Mehrotra's later volume, the contrast nowhere clearer than in comparing 'in irons bound' with KG 179's 'all bundled up'.²⁷ And yet this 'recasting' was produced closer in time to the emergence of the Beats, and closer still to Mehrotra's discovery of them. If one of the achievements of *Songs of Kabir* really is to infuse the *bhakti* poet with the counter-cultural energy of Ginsberg and Corso, why does Mehrotra come so late to their idiom? Are we dealing here with the aesthetic time-lag attributed to the literary world's outlying provinces,²⁸ or with the asynchrony of the literary world-system?²⁹

It is difficult to answer these questions without turning to Mehrotra's own verse, beginning with 'Bharatmata: A Prayer'. The first of his major mature poems, it was

27 In his comparison of two of Mehrotra's translations of KG 85, Peter McDonald likewise notes that the recent version creates 'a more supple idiomatic English', freed of 'the sonorous Yeatsian repetitions [...] and stilted syntactic inversions [...] of the first version', *Artefacts of Writing: Ideas of the State and Communities of Letters from Matthew Arnold to Xu Bing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), p. 239.

28 Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. by Malcolm B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

29 Warwick Research Collective (WRc), *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015).

published in a 1966 pamphlet by the ezra-fakir press of Bombay, and then reprinted in a 1970 issue of *Mahfil*, an American journal devoted to South Asian writings. A reasonably long poem, 'Bharatmata' cannot be cited in full, but what follows is the first of its eight sections:

O BHARATMATA
 O SOCIALIST MOTHER INDIA
 O BRIGHT STAR
 O LAND OF THE PEACOCK & THE LION
 LAND OF THE BRAHMAPUTRA & THE HIMALAYA
 OF THE BRAVE JAWAHAR
 OF THE MIGHTY GANDHI
 HOMAGE TO THEE

india
 my beloved country, ah my motherland
 you are, in the world's slum
 the lavatory

 the septic tank where in paper gutters
 fall the
 marksrublesdollarspoundsyenslirasfrancs
 yet our stomachs remain sirens
 tooting pathetic messages

 i am so used to your cities with a
 chain reaction of suburbs
 where whole families live in bathrooms
 and generations are pushed out of skylights
 and the next one sticks out its head
 like a tapeworm through frozen shit.
 used to the village reduced to a bone
 and then swallowed.
 i am used to seeing pot-bellied children
 ride the dog with jockey's confidence.
 used to the old man pick his nose
 in prayerlike concentration.
 used to a hand
 rag like
 wiping the
 mouse like
 car

with a
leaf
outside
industry house³⁰

As with the translations of Kabir, there is little in language or lineation to challenge a non-Indian anglophone reader, and certainly nothing to stifle the force of the invective, which rips away the mask of the opening incantations, reversing the poem's epideictical tenor from praise to blame. On the contrary, it seems that one of the poem's aims is to situate India in the world, subject to economic imperatives originating in the advanced economies. Thus the invocations of local power, whether in the domains of nature (Brahmaputra, Himalaya) or of politics (Jawahar [Nehru], Gandhi), are expelled as hot air, the 'pathetic messages' of empty stomachs.

And yet, even if the poem's progress deflates the localizing gestures of the opening paragraph, for any non-Indian reader the anaphoric stress on habituation — the four sentences in which 'used to' is the main verb — re-asserts a cultural distance, which grows towards the section's final lines, where the leaf is juxtaposed more jarringly with the productive technologies signalled by 'industry house' than with the mouse-like car. For what is only too familiar to the persona (and presumably to readers for whom such scenes are similarly commonplace) is likely to have struck the poem's non-Indian readers as very much unfamiliar; and though the shape of the verse imbues the final line with the qualities of the turn, it is difficult not to feel that something of the effect is lost if one does not know the precise location and significance of industry house.

30 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, *Bharatmata: A Prayer* (Bombay: ezra-fakir press, 1966).

In truth, there is unease long before we reach this point, for though the rhetorical magic of the preliminary incantations may be dispelled, the very title of Mehrotra's poem invokes a liturgical tradition quite distinct from that of the siddur, psalter, and hymnal, and one embedded in religious beliefs and practices which will be present to a good number of American and British readers only as a sense of absence, a lack in knowledge and understanding. Likewise with the poem's opening dedications, to Indira Gandhi and Malay Roy Choudhury. The former had come to power as Prime Minister early in 1966, but if one initially suspects she is the object of praise — the SOCIALIST MOTHER INDIA — that interpretation is difficult to sustain as the poem unfolds, full of scorn for politicians. Full of scorn for poets too, so that, even if one knows that Choudhury had recently been imprisoned for the obscenity of his poem 'Stark Electric Jesus', the meaning of the dedication is opaque.

This sense of uncertainty continues throughout, for me, and perhaps for most readers who encountered 'Bharatmata' in the pages of *Mahfil*. This has to do with the manner in which the poem pulls one in — through the use of idiomatic and technical repertoires that are compelling but hardly uncomfortable — whilst periodically disturbing one's confidence, in ways small (the appearance of untranslated words, references to local places and practices), and large (the invocations, at the poem's beginning and its end, of a Hindu liturgical tradition). This effect is crystalized in the section which begins:

ah
walt whit
wish you were around
and tried to contain these multitudes

and tried being our Representative Man
 your yankee tricks wont click with us³¹

The familiarity with which Mehrotra invokes Whitman (and thus, by implication the Ginsberg of ‘A Supermarket in California’) is countered by the gesture of refusal, most pointed in the possessive pronouns: ‘our’, with its added emphasis, followed by the ‘your’ qualifying Whitman’s ‘yankee tricks’, leading back to ‘us’, in a line which displays a command of an American idiom — especially in the internally rhyming ‘click’ — whilst insisting on its unsuitability.

Of course, these moments of disorientation do not make the poem illegible. We easily skip over words and references we do not understand; we take for granted that we have only limited access to all the resources of a poem’s idioculture. Nor does it make the poem unworkable. On the contrary, the play of proximity and distance may be central to its effects, and its strangeness may be the grounds of a properly literary experience, an encounter with otherness that leaves readers — that left this reader — captivated by its intensity, and particularly by its stark metaphors and blasphemously resonant incantations. Indeed, as Peter McDonald has remarked, a certain ‘artful’ obscurity is an ‘essential element of Mehrotra’s own foreignizing poetics’, troubling even those readers endowed with a high degree of relevant ‘*cultural* competence.’³²

And yet, there is a nagging sense that something important may be missing, exacerbated by the insistence that ‘yankee tricks’ cannot ‘click’ with Indian poets and subject matters. Is this a reflexive acknowledgement of the poem’s deficiency? Or does it mean there may be something in-

31 Ibid.

32 McDonald, *Artefacts of Writing*, pp. 236–37.

herently faulty in a response to Mehrotra's verse that takes as its starting point his 'intense and original engagement with American poetry', using this as an alibi for overlooking the significance of cultural distance? Might we be guilty of misreading if we presume that the interplay of proximity and distance is central to the poem, when this interplay may be apparent especially (only?) for non-Indian readers of 'Bharatmata'?

IV

In *Well-Weighed Syllables*, Derek Attridge writes that, in order to understand the success of a poet like Richard Sneyhurst, as well as the interest of Spenser and Philip Sidney in classical quantitative metres, we need to know the poems and the 'discussion that surround them', and also 'just what an educated Elizabethan took to be the metre of a Latin poem', and 'how he pronounced the individual words, how he delivered the lines of verse, and how he had been taught Latin, and in particular Latin prosody, at school'.³³ More recently, and in a quite different vein, Timothy Brennan has lamented 'the misplaced sociological hermeneutic of world literature', and called 'for a different literary sociology that captures the affiliative networks of authors choosing, strategizing, carving out a space in a hostile commercial environment of circles, schools, and class fractions'.³⁴ However differently oriented, both Attridge and Brennan describe a project of research that is philological as much as historical or sociological, and

33 Attridge, *Well-Weighed Syllables*, p. 2.

34 Timothy Brennan, 'Cosmopolitanism and World Literature', in *The Cambridge Companion to World Literature*, eds. Ben Etherington and Jarad Zimler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 23–36 (p. 34).

which entails a description of those horizons of expectation and possibility that condition any text's emergence into meaning. In very different ways, both also recall the work of Pierre Bourdieu, and his belief that literary texts are de-realized when abstracted from the literary fields from which they emerged, 'stripped of everything that attached them to the most concrete debates of their time', and thereby 'impoverished and transformed in the direction of intellectualism or an empty humanism'.³⁵

Almost as a riposte to any kind of localizing criticism, Mehrotra has suggested that anglophone Indian 'writers have seldom acknowledged each other's presence', and that in 'Indian literature in English [...] there have been no schools, literary movements, or even regional groups [...]'. Its history is scattered, discontinuous, and transnational. It is made up of individual writers who appear to be *sui generis*. They are explained neither by what went before them nor by what came after.³⁶ This will be comforting to non-Indian readers, who may therefore be content with whatever knowledge they happen to possess of those metropolitan literary currents that washed over Mehrotra and his peers. However, almost in the same breath, Mehrotra has insisted — when speaking of 'the conditions that have recently made Indian writing something of a commodity' — that 'unlike Coca-Cola, a piece of writing is savoured best in the place where its secret recipe is from, and more often than not it is only really possible for it to be satisfyingly consumed in the same place too'.³⁷ If the suggestion here is that even transnationalism might be locally

35 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993), p. 32.

36 Mehrotra, 'Introduction', pp. 25–26.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 23–24.

inflected, it is borne out by an exploration of the print culture from which 'Bharatmata' and 'Recastings from Kabir' emerged; however, as we shall see, the same cannot be said of Mehrotra's claim that anglophone Indian literature has entirely lacked movements and groupings.

On its back-page, the 'Bharatmata' pamphlet describes the poem's provenance: 'passages from bharatmata have appeared in outcast. the whole poem will appear in klactoveedsedsteen (ed. carl weissner 1-3a muhltalstr, 69 heidelberg germany) in a special issoo which will feature the hungries and others of the indian avant.'³⁸ Here, Mehrotra takes pains to mark his metropolitan success but he also affiliates himself to a local avant-garde through its best-known exponents, the writers of the Hungry Generation. By then, the Hungryalists had achieved international as well as local notoriety, largely because of Malay Roy Choudhury's arrest in 1964. Criminal proceedings followed, generating coverage in the foreign press, precisely because Choudhury's cause was taken up by Allen Ginsberg and Howard McCord, who published an English self-translation of 'Stark Electric Jesus' towards the end of 1965, or the beginning of 1966, and then guest edited 'HUNGRY!', a special issue of *Salted Feathers*, featuring letters from Ginsberg and Gary Snyder.

If the 'Bharatmata' pamphlet declares Mehrotra's affiliations with both the Beats and a local avant-garde, it tells a similarly complex story about circulation. The back-page announces that the ezra-fakir press — Mehrotra himself in one of his several guises as publisher and editor — produced 'poetry mags poetry collections broadsides concrete poems and everything else which can be recreated on a stencil', and exchanged these with a striking

38 Mehrotra, *Bharatmata*, back-page.

number of overseas and especially American periodicals and presses: 'mother, rot, zebra books, manhattan rev, openings press, outcast, poetmeat, screeches pubs., poetry rev, klactoveedsedsteen, breakthru, avalanche, kritik, new measure, approches, poetry australia, weed, dust, keeper's voice, unilit, contra '66, origins/diversions, trace, dionysus, riverrun, wormwood review, hors commerce press, damn you'.³⁹ The list points out a network of exchange with nodes in cities across India (Bombay, Secunderabad, New Delhi, Allahabad) and around the USA, as well as in Paris, Heidelberg, and Sydney, and confirms that its currency was nothing other than the various little magazines and pamphlets themselves.

The *ezra-fakir* press might thus be understood as an instance of the mid-century mimeo revolution, during which poets became their own publishers and printers, using national postal services to market and disseminate their offerings. In these domains, Mehrotra demonstrated notable zeal: he was responsible not only for his press, but also, jointly or solely, for three little magazines, including *ezra* and *fakir*, as well as their predecessor, *damn you: a magazine of the arts*, which he had launched from Allahabad. Given the broad identification of the Beats with the mimeo revolution, all of these ventures attest to Mehrotra's engagement with American poetry, though *ezra* claims a particular intimacy with Pound, whilst *damn you* explicitly references *fuck you: a magazine of the arts*, put out by Ed Sanders in New York from 1962.

The nature of this engagement makes it impossible to sustain the view of Mehrotra's belatedness. Far from being a mere consumer or emulator, he was an active participant in a transnational field. His own magazines featured Amer-

39 Ibid.

ican, British, and Mexican poets, and he contributed to several of those overseas periodicals for which *damn you*, *ezra* and *fakir* were exchanged. And yet it is clear that all of Mehrotra's editorial efforts were engaged at the same time with a local poetry scene that was far less scattered and discontinuous than his own later remarks suggest. Without having to look far, we find evidence of position-takings which were, necessarily, relational, and which took for granted the existence of a national literary space, endowed with its own institutions, and dynamized by its own tensions (aesthetic, but also generational and regional).

The Hungryalists, for example, positioned themselves self-consciously against what had by then emerged as a literary establishment, whether identified with Purushottama Lal's Writers Workshop, set up in Calcutta in 1958, or the Bombay little magazines edited by Nissim Ezekiel, such as *Quest* and *Poetry India*, or the Bengali writers organized around the journal *Krittibas*, which had first appeared in 1953. The first issue of *Waste Paper: A Hungry Generation Newsletter* insists: 'No other group has any relation with the Hungry Generation because Hungry Generation is a Literary Movement. [...] Hungry Generation, from the beginning, is original and has no relation with any group or coterie.'⁴⁰

In a similar vein, the inside-cover of *ezra* 3 quotes a review which declares: 'Anybody cheesed-off [with] the literary establishment in India will welcome these two magazines (damn you & ezra).. . . . The Illustrated-Ezekiel-Lal axis if they are not already awake, ought to beware.'⁴¹ Yet, if Mehrotra had at one point aligned himself

40 'Othe [sic] Groups', *Waste Paper: A Hungry Generation Newsletter*, 1 (1967), p. 5.

41 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, ed., *ezra: a magazine of neo imagiste poetry*, 3 (1968), inside cover. The first term of this axis is a reference to

with the Hungrylists, the 'statement' included in *damn you 6*, positions the magazine's project not only against Lal and Ezekiel ('a bombay professor'), but also against this other faction of the Indian avant-garde:

not the organ of a hungry generation, a clan of anti-poets, or a writer's workshop. not the public child of a bombay professor. we are illiterates. unaware of ists/isms. [...]

a mag which gets out two issoos, survives the debacle, and goes on to a third fourth fifth can go on to a hundred. and now its time to solidify our position. dig in. make zigzag trenches. fire back. oil and set the mimeomachine like a machine-gun.⁴²

The language of combat is striking, but also characteristic of the 'craft wars' that were being waged in other decolonizing poetry scenes at much the same time. Inevitably, these entailed confrontations with metropolitan poets as well as with local predecessors and peers. In *damn you 6*, Mehrotra drew lines of battle by describing the inability of British and American readers to think of the world of English poetry other than as one divided strictly between them: 'ken geering, ed. of *breakthru*, thinks we are yankee oriented, a yankee, eric oatman, who edits the *manhattan review*, writes "the name is too damn british". and so, we like to keep them guessing, and leave the capitals of the skyscraping earth to decide amongst themselves.'⁴³ Concurrently, the editorial statement of *ezra 1* issued a more straightfor-

The Illustrated Weekly of India, which 'first started Indian poetry in English in the late 1940s'. Emma Bird, 'A Platform for Poetry: The PEN All-India Centre and a Bombay Poetry Scene', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53.1-2 (2017), pp. 207-20 (p. 210).

42 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, 'statement', *damn you: a magazine of the arts*, 6 (1968), np.

43 Ibid.

ward refusal: 'the mag might smack of "beatness". you are wrong. it is gently avant garde.'⁴⁴

Yet as much as the local poetry scene was structured by inter- and intragenerational tensions, and by claims to distinction, it was also a site of collaboration. Little magazines and presses could be vehicles for connection as much as contestation. Mehrotra had edited *damn you* together with Amit and Alok Rai; and, after moving to Bombay, began to interact with several poets there. The most important of these was Arun Kolatkar, who wrote in Marathi as well as English, but Mehrotra also developed relationships with Adil Jussawalla and Gieve Patel.

In the mid-1970s, Kolatkar, Mehrotra, Patel, and Jussawalla would create a publishing cooperative, Clearing House Press, to bring out their own important volumes of verse.⁴⁵ But something of their collective identity had already begun to emerge earlier in the decade. In a special issue of *Mahfil* published in 1972 and devoted entirely to Indian poetry in English, one of their contemporaries, Pritish Nandy, spoke dismissively of 'the arty-arty style of the ad-men poets', who belonged to 'esoteric coteries' associated with Nissim Ezekiel.⁴⁶ Nandy did not name any of these 'ad-men poets', but Kolatkar was then working in an advertising firm as an art director, and both he and Pa-

44 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, Editorial Note, *ezra: an imagiste magazine*, 1 (1967), inside back page.

45 For an account of this venture, and important documents related to it, see Jerry Pinto, 'Key Document: Eight Books, Seven Poets, One Clearing House', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 53.1-2 (2017), pp. 233-46.

46 Suresh Kohli and Pritish Nandy, 'Suresh Kohli Interviews Pritish Nandy: Tradition and the Individual Talent', *Mahfil*, 8.4 (1972), pp. 11-15 (p. 15). By way of contrast with Mehrotra, in the same interview, Nandy remarks: 'British poetry ceased with Auden and American poetry never started' (p. 13).

tel were practicing visual artists. Their involvements with Mehrotra and Jussawalla, as well as with Ezekiel, were also common knowledge. The elder poet had published all four in *Poetry India*, and, in the same issue of *Mahfil*, singled out Mehrotra, Patel, and Jussawalla for praise.⁴⁷

Nandy's sense of their 'arty-arty' style perhaps also had something to do with their association with *Vrishchik*. Founded in 1969 and devoted to visual arts as well as poetry, the magazine 'brought poets, painters, translators, art critics onto a common platform.'⁴⁸ In fact, Kolatkar, Patel, and Mehrotra had appeared together in a special issue of September–October 1970. Ostensibly devoted to medieval verse, the actual focus was narrower, since it included translations only of *bhakti* poets: of Muktabai, Janabai, and Namdeo, by Kolatkar; of Vasto, by Patel; and of Kabir, by Mehrotra. Indeed, this was precisely the issue in which Mehrotra's 'Recastings' appeared.

By this point, all three poets had been working on the *bhaktas* for several years, though the *Vrishchik* special issue needs to be understood as the outcome of something more than happy coincidence or the meeting of minds. It needs to be understood, instead, as a significant collective position-taking in the anglophone Indian literary field, underwritten by shared principles and priorities. Laetitia Zecchini observes that 'in India, [...] most modern poets are translators.'⁴⁹ Certainly, they have a great deal to translate, including several millennia of Sanskrit texts; the Persian poetry of the Mughal court; long, deep, and durable traditions in multiple vernaculars, including Urdu/Hindi,

47 Suresh Kohli and Nissim Ezekiel, 'Suresh Kohli Interviews Nissim Ezekiel: A Search for Limits', *Mahfil*, 8.4 (1972), pp. 7–10.

48 Zecchini, 'An Interview with Arvind Krishna Mehrotra', p. 198.

49 Laetitia Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism in India: Moving Lines* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 74.

Bengali, Kannada, Marathi, Tamil, and Telugu; and over a century of writings in English. However, this on its own does not explain the need for translation, which expressed itself most clearly in *Poetry India*, a journal devoted to English translations of texts in classical, medieval, and modern South Asian languages. Why were Indian poets so preoccupied with translating for one another from their own traditions?

A straightforward answer is that, since few Indian poets, if any, commanded more than two or three languages, translation became a means of sharing local traditions. But this makes translation a matter of mere circulation, when it is considerably more important, since even when texts and practices belonging to hetero-linguistic literary cultures are legible, for an entire community of readers as well as writers, they cannot be said to constitute the literary material — in Adorno's sense — until they are first translated. This is because each literary language, and each literary culture, is confronted and therefore structured by its own problematics and its own history, so that not only the solutions but also the challenges are particular to each.

Writing of the formation of vernacular literatures, Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock explains that their emergence always demands two processes: *literization*, by which a standardized written variety is abstracted from a dialect continuum; and *literarization*, by which a written language is made into a literary language. This second process tends, according to Pollock, to entail the emulation of works from the canon of the cosmopolitan literature against which the vernaculars define themselves.⁵⁰ What I am suggesting

50 Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

here is that the kinds of labour necessary for *literarization* are ongoing, because literary languages are always being remade; and are as much in evidence when materials (plural: meaning authorships, texts, genres, techniques, themes, etc.) are imported from one vernacular tradition into another — say, from the Marathi into the Gujarati tradition, or from the Hindi into the anglo-Indian tradition — and thus constituted as part of the latter's literary material (singular: as Adorno uses the term). It is, in other words, only by being converted into workable English poetry that non-anglophone Indian verse could begin to reshape the horizons of what could be made by anglophone Indian poets, contributing to what Mehrotra has recently described as a 'working, workable tradition'.⁵¹

The question facing such poets was therefore not *whether* to translate, but *what*, and the manner in which they answered said a great deal about their aesthetic priorities. In some cases, the source texts were contemporary, as with the Hungryalists' self-translations, and Nandy's work on his Bengali contemporaries Samar Sen and Subhash Mukhopadhyay. In other cases, they were historically distant but highly canonical, as in A. K. Ramanujan's translations of Classical Tamil verse, and Purushottama Lal's of Vedic Hymns. The choice to translate the *bhakti* poets was anything but neutral. On the contrary, it spoke of an investment in a practice characterized by spiritualism and personal devotion; the rejection of caste, class, and socio-religious authority; and a turn to orality. The *bhaktas*, as Pollock explains, belonged to a second and more radical

51 Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, 'Arvind Krishna Mehrotra on his translations of Kabir's Songs', online video recording of interview with Souradeep Roy of *Guftugu Journal*, YouTube, 13 September 2018 <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2FdL4OSgnY>> [accessed 19 June 2020].

wave of vernacularization, which rejected the cosmopolitan Sanskrit tradition, rather than seeking to emulate it. Using forms 'closely linked to folk song',⁵² they 'rebelled against imposed brahmanical orthodoxy to reveal the inclusive, informal and experimental dimension of language and the sacred'.⁵³

V

The previous section might be understood as an attempt to sketch some of the dimensions of the field from which Mehrotra emerged, and the constitution of the material to which he contributed. It may be understood, that is, to undertake the groundwork for a project of research that, in their different ways, both Brennan and Attridge describe, which attends not only to localized debates, but also to the institutions and networks of literary formation, publication, and circulation, and which thereby attempts to bridge cultural distance, not by striving towards the 'complete recovery of the original context', but by clarifying the distinctive stakes and problematics of a particular literary culture.⁵⁴ For this reason it begins with literary rather than with cultural, political, and social contexts.

Admittedly, the emphasis on print culture and position-takings begins to overshadow the verse, though even this relatively superficial account of Mehrotra's relations helps, I think, to reframe 'Bharatmata'. To begin with, it seems wrong to read the liturgical invocations

52 Charlotte Vaudeville, 'Sant Mat: Santism as the Universal Path to Sanctity', in *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition*, ed. by Karine Schomer and W. H. McLeod (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1987), pp. 21–40 (p. 22).

53 Zecchini, *Arun Kolatkar and Literary Modernism*, pp. 78–79.

54 Attridge, *The Work of Literature*, p. 210.

as blasphemous, in the manner of Choudhury's 'Stark Electric Jesus', when they are properly iconoclastic, indicting as idolatrous the rhetoric that yokes nation-building to religious devotion. Indeed, a comparison with Choudhury's poem, and especially its own cloacal lexicon and metaphors, brings into focus what we might describe as the 'worldliness' of 'Bharatmata', in Edward Said's sense of being 'situated in the world, and about the world', rather than in the more muted sense of being cosmopolitan.⁵⁵ For Mehrotra's poem is preoccupied with something other than the travails of the persona's body and mind.

In the case of KG 179, an account of the anglophone Indian literary field of the late 1960s and early 1970s demands an even greater interpretive adjustment, not least in the manner of treating Mehrotra as a standard-bearer of cosmopolitanism. This is because translation itself is re-contextualized as a practice central to this field, but it is also because Mehrotra's occasional deployment of a Beat idiom in *Songs of Kabir* can no longer be taken as evidence of any straightforward kind of emulation, or of his belatedness. On the contrary, his own early verse reveals that the technical and linguistic achievements of the Beats, as well as the print technology and culture with which they were associated, had already been subsumed in the verse of anglophone Indian poets of the late 1960s. Mehrotra's use of this idiom must therefore be seen as a choice, one which has consequences for how we read KG 179. For, if it is not an effect of Mehrotra's 'generative situation', or of the peripheral status of the Indian literary field, then the belatedness of the idiom attaches not to Mehrotra, but

55 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile, and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta, 2001), p. 375.

to the Beats and to Kabir. As such, making Kabir sound sometimes like one of the Beats becomes a means of identifying his iconoclasm with an American counter-cultural movement that now seems naïve as well as vital, genuinely disruptive but ultimately contained.

In this way, KG 179 becomes a poem about literature's materials, and also about its material, in Adorno's sense. It throws into relief certain of the sediments of anglophone Indian verse, by using the Beats to mark the moment in which both they and the *bhaktas* were absorbed, or re-absorbed. It throws into relief also certain of the sediments of anglophone American verse. For if we set aside the notion that Mehrotra is 'naturally' attracted to an undifferentiated 'Americaneese', the poem's Leadbelly epigraph cannot be read simply as another shocking anachronism, or a consequence of Mehrotra's participation 'in the improvisational fluidity of Kabir'.⁵⁶ Instead, Leadbelly's own historicity comes into focus, and with it the significance of the blues as a vernacular tradition which was itself subjected to processes of literarization, first in the verse of the Harlem Renaissance, and then in the writings of the Beats, whose 'group vernacular', as Rosemarie Ostler explains, was 'largely a version of hipster slang spoken by African-American musicians and bebop fans in 1950s New York'.⁵⁷ Framing KG 179, Leadbelly's words thus establish analogies between Mehrotra and the Beats on the one hand, and the *bhaktas* and the blues on the other. These are mutually illuminating, reminding us in both cases of the manner in which vernaculars and folk arts are made into the materials

56 Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 212.

57 Rosemarie Ostler, *Dewdroppers, Waldos, and Slackers: A Decade-by-Decade Guide to the Vanishing Vocabulary of the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 112–13.

of literature, but also, in the case of the *bhaktas*, of the fundamentally oral, musical, and communal dimensions of their compositions, and in the case of the blues, of the radicalism and even iconoclasm of the religious traditions from which it emerged.

KG 179's triangulation of the blues, Beats, and *bhaktas* also gives particular content to the epigraph's implicit distinction between those who merely *seem* to sing, and those who truly sing the blues; and to the principal condition for the latter, which is not any kind of technical mastery, but simply *having* the blues, which is to say having an acquaintance with suffering that is both spiritual and material, and that is inextricably linked with racial oppression and cultural marginalization. Thus weighted, the epigraph takes measure of the difference, otherwise unplumbed, between the pundit's 'parrotting the name | Of Rama' and Kabir's 'singing of Rama': salvation requires not only words but song, and singing requires an intimacy with (though not necessarily an experience of) certain conditions of existence, including those material deprivations — of wealth, food, water, warmth, pleasure — which give urgency to apprehensions of spiritual destitution. Singing of Rama may be possible, in other words, only if one has confronted the inadequacy of speech in the face of 'beggars in the streets'.

If the Leadbelly epigraph is Mehrotra's way of signalling that the Kabir of KG 179 appears to parrot the Beats only if one ignores the origins of their idiom in vernacular song, then the final violence of the poem seems at least partly directed against those who traffic too blithely in the artefacts of cultures distant from their own: a warning about the Beats themselves, to be sure, but also to metropolitan readers. But the epigraph — which identifies Leadbelly with Mehrotra as well as with Kabir — is also

a way of recalling the history of racial and class antagonisms, of imperial and colonial exploitations, that frequently underwrite the acquisition and appropriation of cultural materials, including languages, as well as the circulation of literary media, forms, and texts. Indeed, one way of reading the poem, and the volume more broadly, is as an effort to vernacularize English, to remind us that we ought not to take for granted the processes by which English becomes available across the globe as a material for literary making, inevitably by being re-made, or re-cast, though not without costs.

Which returns us to the question of the conditions of literary experience and the problem of cultural distance, the question, that is, of the workability of texts that originate in literary environments that are not those in which we, as readers, are embedded. It is a question I have tried to explore by considering two moments in the career of a single author, whose texts are clearly legible because he is a contemporary located in a homo-linguistic literary environment. This question can be formulated quite succinctly: can we experience texts as properly inventive without any familiarity with the worlds in which they originate? If I return to my initial reading, I think the answer must be affirmative. And yet, there is so much missing from this reading — so much of what the poem has to say about the world — that we must wonder whether it would not be worth distinguishing between different registers of literary experience, that is, between a reading that opens us to otherness, and a reading that, in opening us to otherness, also forces us to inhabit a truth of our world.

At the very least, we might ask again about the value of a criticism that I am tempted to describe as archaeological in spite of Attridge's reservations. For it begins by encoun-

tering an object that may well fascinate us, but which is given its full weight and meaning only when we dust away the layers in which it is embedded, revealing its relations with other perhaps less beautiful objects, as well as something of its purpose within the economy of the whole. However, since appeals to the social sciences are not only ubiquitous in theories of world literature, but also fraught with the perils of positivism, I would rather identify such a project — which I have only partially attempted here, and which entails the illumination of a distinct literary world giving its own perspective onto the world at large — as something like the work of world literature; or, rather, the work of world literary criticism.

Jarad Zimble, 'Working Conditions: World Literary Criticism and the Material of Arvind Krishna Mehrotra', in *The Work of World Literature*, ed. by Francesco Giusti and Benjamin Lewis Robinson, *Cultural Inquiry*, 19 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2021), pp. 173–207 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-19_08>

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