

MUNDUS IMAGINALIS

WORLD LITERATURES

AFTER PHANTOM EMPIRES

Hamid Dabashi

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World Literatures After Phantom Empires

HAMID DABASHI

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For
Yosef Sorett
Lisa Hollibaugh
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Christine Butcher
Joseph Howley
Ashley Nail
Scott Harris
Anna Reinhard . . . and
Megan Friar
the Heart and Soul of the Columbia Core Curriculum

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Introduction

Mundus Imaginalis as World Literatures

During the academic year 2023–24, as I was preparing to write this book on the idea of "World Literature" and my opposing conception of "world literature," I was also teaching a section of our famed "Literature Humanities" course in the Core Curriculum of Columbia University, where I teach. In that same year my colleague Joseph Howley, a professor of classics who was the director of the Literature Humanities program at the time, invited me to join a small committee tasked with revising the curriculum—which is something we regularly do at Columbia. Our committee concluded our task by identifying eleven texts for the fall and eleven for the spring semester, until the next round of our periodic curricular reviews. Because we decided to cut a number of very popular texts, such as Miguel de Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605) and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), we also decided that each semester we would give the individual instructors the option of adding one text of their own choosing to the list. The eleven texts we selected for the fall semester were Enheduana's *Exaltation of Inanna*; *Gilgamesh*; the Book of Genesis; Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*; Sappho's fragments (as translated by Anne Carson in *If Not, Winter*); Aeschylus's *Oresteia*; Plato's *Symposium*; Virgil's *Aeneid*; and the Gospels of Luke and John. To this list, for my own section, I added *Kelilah wa Dimnah* / *Kelilah and Dimnah*. The eleven texts we chose for the spring semester were Claudia Rankine's *Citizen*, Augustine's *Confessions*, Ibn Arabi's *The Translator of Desires*, Marie de France's *Lais*, Dante's *Inferno*, Montaigne's *Essays*, Shakespeare's *King Lear*, selected works by Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, to which, for my own section, I added Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

A number of key factors became evident as we were revising the syllabus, which at this stage reflected the cumulative result of generations of my colleagues'

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thinking critically about their curricular duties to successive generations of our students. First and foremost, over the decades, the curriculum expanded its limited Mediterranean domain well into Anatolia and Mesopotamia, and we were now reading texts from contemporary Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and far into North Africa. Second, a good number of female authors like Enheduanna and Sappho were included from this wider domain. The result was a reframing of the Bible and texts from classical antiquity in a much wider geographical spectrum. Moving into the spring semester, the inclusion of Ibn Arabi's *Translator of Desires* and *Don Quixote* (which in this round of revisions we had to exclude) indicated clearly the expansion of the Mediterranean basin to its North African domains. Equally if not more important was the inclusion of both North and South American territories, in both Claudia Rankine and Toni Morrison (both African Americans) and the Brazilian Machado de Assis (a selection that we, again, had to drop in this round of revisions) or the Mexican Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. I added *Kelilah and Dimnah* to the fall list to expand that geographic domain even farther east into India, Iran, the Arab world, and the Levant by way of a text that had come to the European scene from its farthest peripheries; and in the spring I opted for Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to include a text that moved narratively from Europe to Africa and gently introduced our students to the theme of colonialism. During our revisions, we also got rid of the term *Western* from the title of our course and simply called it "Literature Humanities." In a way, this curricular conversation among my Columbia colleagues and the previous generations of scholars and teachers teaching these texts, of which I have been a member for about four decades, very much reflected the geographical, cultural, and presumed civilizational terms of thinking about world literature—a subject I wish now to open for a critical examination in this book.

The Main Idea

The current conception of World Literature, as it has been suggested, received, understood, theorized, expanded, corroborated, or even criticized by leading literary theorists from Goethe to David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, Gayatri Spivak, and Emily Apter (chief among others), is predicated on the centrality of what has code-named itself "the West": the imaginative geography of an imperial vision of the world with varied forms of ideological landmarks, including this idea of World Literature. This imaginative geography called "the West" and the imperial legacy it has fathomed for itself from the Romans building on the Greeks (Virgil's take on Homer) through various European empires, and now down to the American empire continues to craft a

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normative hegemony of its literary events and, in the shadow of that imaginary phantom, casts a long shadow over the rest of the world in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The ideological binary of "the West" and "the Rest" is therefore definitive to the dominant idea of World Literature, even (or particularly) when it becomes liberal in its affected generosities and feigns welcoming scattered aspects of other worldly literatures, effectively de-worlded, after the coded terms *multiculturalism* and *globalization* have been allowed to agitate it. In this superimposed ideological matrix, "the Rest" is deboned and deprived of its own respective worldliness and liberally incorporated and assimilated into the imperiled domain of "the West." This is a flawed and at this point fraudulent state of affairs, and I am one among many other scholars who have started challenging its validity.

More recently much serious resistance has been made against this cannibalization of "the Rest" into "the West" that has seriously questioned the idea of "the World" planted at the heart of this presumption of World Literature. I have had a modest share in that project by dwelling on one particularly crucial text of the Persian epic the *Shahnameh* (1010) and by demonstrating how the three conflated worlds at the heart of this seminal text—the world of its author, the world the author creates, and the successive worlds in which we have historically received and read this Persian epic—come together and radically dismantle the Eurocentric project of World Literature.[1] In this book you are about to read, I wish to expand that argument not just by adding one, two, or more specific texts to it, which I will inevitably have to do anyway, but also by mapping out an entire literary world that posits a different vision of world and worldly literatures from the most distant to the most immediate times. My ultimate purpose, however, is not to pit one idea of world literature against another; rather, it is to expose the ideological foregrounding of all such purported worlds and, thus, to show the power of the fictive apparition of a shadowy empire—a phantom empire—Persian, American, Indian, or Chinese, casting a long ideological shadow on all claims to world literature. The point therefore is not to promote a Perso-centric or Arab-centric or any other kind of monarchic conception of world literature against the dominant Eurocentricity we have inherited. The point rather is to expose the ideological bases of all such worlds and thus to dismantle the power of the fictive apparition of a shadowy empire—a phantom empire—at work anytime we go near the current coinage of *world literature*. Instead, I wish to detail the working of an imaginal world, a "Mundus Imaginalis," in any and all literary events. What I detail in this book therefore is not the particularities of a Perso-centric vision of world literature but the expanded literary spaces where one particularly worldly literature has staged itself as a modus operandi of a

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Mundus Imaginalis. The point is therefore to expose and overcome a hermeneutic paradox: that texts begin to make sense via the paratext of their ideological foregrounding—imperialist, Orientalist, Marxist, Islamist, or Persianist. My intention is to move away from the false premise of simply exacerbating the imperial imagination by way of adding more worlds to its insatiable world-mongering (add a Persian, Chinese, Indian, or Latin American world to the Western world). That—as we have learned from Tomoko Masuzawa's excellent book *The Invention of World Religions* (2005)—is a useless and in fact counterproductive project. Throughout this book I will make this main theoretical thrust of my project clear.

In this book I wish to suggest that the idea of *world literature* today needs to overcome all inherited binary oppositions epitomized in "the West and the Rest" and must therefore move toward the cultivation of a whole new conception of our planetary whereabouts in a post-Western world: a centerless, agonistic, and pluralist world, where literary events begin to make an entirely different set of senses. Instead of an Orientalist or Persianist or Americanist or Chinese or Eurocentric world literature, or even the kinds of world literature Franco Moretti has suggested on the economic model of the so-called world-system (Immanuel Wallerstein's formulation), we need to turn to the prospects of a defiant and subversive conception of world literature where, from Latin American magic realism to the effervescent poetry of radical poets around the world (Mahmoud Darwish, Pablo Neruda, Ahmad Shamlou, Nazim Hikmet, etc.), we find a whole new way of understanding, reading, and theorizing literature's worldliness. In that prospect, texts are liberated from their enforced imperial contexts to form and inform a radically different worldliness according to their own inner literary disposition.

Now suppose, for heuristic purposes, that the same Eurocentric idea of World Literature were to be initiated, inaugurated, understood, theorized, and exercised by Chinese, Indian, Russian, Japanese, Egyptian, Mexican, Brazilian, Arab, or Iranian literary theorists performing their thinking in a language other than English, predicated *not* on the assumption of this "Western" literary hegemony but under the shadow of the phantom imperial imagination of these worldly cultures having once ruled much of the civilized world. What then? Predicated on a world of their own literary heritage, how does a Chinese, an Arab, a Mexican, or an Iranian literary theorist see the world and, in it, imagine the idea of *World Literature*? In this book I plan to engage in such a proposition, and I examine one such idea of *world literature* as perceived in a Persian literary imagination beyond the reach of the leading theorists of World Literature as now made dominant by those who call themselves "Western" literary theorists—performed mostly by

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"First World" theorists on "Third World" literary signposts being cannibalized into this contorted conception of World Literature. This is not an exercise in alternative World Literature that replaces one imperial imagination with another. My purpose is something more radical and grassroots. I am aiming to expose the false consciousness underlying all claims to World Literature and, thereafter, to think through alternative ways of reading literatures from around the world.

Over the last two centuries, Persian literary imagination has been cast in the light of a shadow Persian empire (mimicking its "Western" counterpart) that once ruled much of the civilized world and has since been lost to history. In a very similar way, and almost for the same period of time, the idea of World Literature as practiced by leading European and American literary theorists has also been under the shadowy contraption that has extended from the European colonial to the American imperial conquest of the world. Consider the fact that Leo Spitzer (1887–1960) and his *Linguistics and Literary History: Essays in Stylistics* (1948) and Erich Auerbach (1892–1957) speculating on the stylistic formations of Western literature in his *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) were published at almost the same time that Mohammad Taghi Bahar (1886–1951) was writing his version of the selfsame project in his monumental *Sabk-shenasi/Stylistics* (1942–47). Since both Spitzer and Auerbach's practice and that of Bahar are acts of creative imagination cast in critical terms—one of a foregone empire casting a long shadow onto a postcolonial nation and the other the geographical imagination of a dysfunctional empire—I am resorting to the idea of the Mundus Imaginalis, or the *Alam al-Mithal*, the "imaginal world" or the "world of similitudes," as Muslim philosophers have called it, as the philosophical foregrounding of all literary events—including the active or passive imagination of a Word Literature.[2] This implicit imperial world—Persian, Western, American, or otherwise—foregrounds the hermeneutic framing of the texts and literary traditions gathered together and in which they are now being received, perceived, and, perforce, interpreted. This idea of World Literature, I contend in this book, needs to be turned upside down—not with a false imperial imagination overdetermining its nature and preempting its texts, but through the discovery of the Mundus Imaginalis at its heart, rising against those empires that lay false claims on it. As I perceive it here, *world literature* is neither a vacuous republic nor at the service of any dysfunctional empire. It is the humanist manifesto of all the liberated texts rising above and against all the false and falsifying political claims on them. I have had multiple occasions in the past to detail the texture of this Mundus Imaginalis as an allusion to a larger spectrum of ideas from which alternative worlds embrace and animate what we have known and lived in this world.[3] Mundus Imaginalis maps a world of its own, a hidden

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but palpable universe. An entire cosmos is contingent on and embedded in that imaginal universe in aesthetic, poetic, literary, parabolic, or philosophical terms. In this book I wish to extrapolate a radically different idea of world literature from it.

A Shadow Warrior and the Phantom of Liberty

"Well, let me put it very simply"—this is the distinguished Italian literary theorist Franco Moretti just over a quarter of a century ago, in January–February 2000, conjecturing nostalgically on the state of the art and lamenting the prospects of World Literature, based on his readings of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's and Karl Marx's speculations almost two centuries before him: "Comparative literature has not lived up to these beginnings. It's been a much more modest intellectual enterprise, fundamentally limited to Western Europe, and mostly revolving around the river Rhine (German philologists working on French literature). Not much more." From there, Moretti proceeded to ride his hobbyhorse of "distant reading" to which his colleague Gayatri Spivak would soon retort that, no, we do not need distant reading, we in fact need "close reading." We were thus left to pick sides between two English department colleagues![4] They were both for World Literature, to be sure, but, still from two decidedly Eurocentric perspectives, they now wished to open it up to a wider angle of vision for and onto the rest of the world. We were meant to be impressed, grateful, enamored.

Suppose we were not to take sides between two English department scholars and were instead to think of the whole project differently. Then what? Let me first unpack a key concept I have introduced in the title of this book.

What is a "phantom empire"? It is like a phantom pain—say, the pain of an amputated leg that is no longer there, but the brain has not yet come to terms with that lack and keeps registering pain in the nonexistent limb. The pain is real. But the organ that sends the signal is not there. The brain just imagines it to be there. A phantom empire, too, is an imperial imagination without much material evidence to it; it is a military might minus a moral imagination, or even a hegemony. It is a compelling figment of militant imagination that occasions and enables an ideological foregrounding in the form of a literary trope, in this case World Literature, and that begins to cannibalize other worldly literatures of which its practitioners know very little. This phantom empire is the way the United States is imagined as an empire; it is the idea of the "world-system" as a global economic order with the mad logic of capital at its epicenter; or it is the way the Chinese, the Indians, the Russians, or Iranians might imagine their

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imperial pasts continuing to cast a long shadow on their literary and cultural presents.

For a potent simile of this proposition, consider one of Akira Kurosawa's masterpieces, *Kagemusha* (1980), in which we witness the story of a common criminal enlisted to impersonate the dying daimyo Takeda Shingen as a decoy to dissuade rival dynasties from attacking the daimyo's realm. *Kagemusha* is the Japanese term for a "political decoy," or "shadow warrior." This is how I see the ruse of Western Literature at the roots of comparative literature as it is practiced today. It is a political decoy and a shadow discipline, successfully having faked authenticity and fooled the world around it. The common man in Kurosawa's film does his task brilliantly. Even he seems to be convinced he is the real thing. He is indeed indistinguishable from the real Shingen. The mesmerizing part of the story is when the act of playing the feudal lord becomes suffused with being the lord himself, and at some point the charismatic power of the fake and the original becomes indistinguishable—identical. By the end, the imagined charisma of the original and the fake authenticity of the replica interchange and become indistinguishable. The real is as fake as the fake is real. That is the self-centering power of the fake authenticity of "the West" that has planted itself in the very idea of World Literature.

If we were now to pause to consider the prose and politics of the leading literary critics writing mostly in English and residing mostly on North American and Western European (which to this day remains "Western Europe") university campuses, we would find that there has been a false presumption that they are the real thing; for the military power of the US and EU nuclear arsenal and of the fleets of their aircraft carriers and warships has been ideologically internalized in their prose and politics and theoretically sublimated into the power of their panache to think and practice their World Literature as the literary ideology of their military hegemony and imperial politics. The only reason in our academic world we know of Damrosch, Moretti, Casanova, and Spivak, but not of Shafi'i-Kadkani or Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid, is that the first group play their theoretical games in English and the others play theirs in Persian or Arabic. There is no other reason to believe that a professor of comparative literature teaching at Harvard or Princeton or anywhere else in North America or Western Europe is any more real than that *kagemusha*, at one point convinced he is the real warlord.

It is not accidental that in the provocative title of one of his books, *Iran's Epic and America's Empire* (2012), the leading Iranian literary critic writing in English, Mahmoud Omidsalar, suspends the fate of the Persian *Book of Kings* (*Shahnameh*, 1010) on the precipice of American imperial imagination. In that vein, and at the root of Omidsalar's ironic title: Over the last one hundred years plus, leading

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Persianist literati have been thinking and writing about Persian literature in a global context that centers on an imperial perception of their historical homeland that is entirely imaginative and no longer exists—a world that extends from the current boundaries of Iran to Eastern Anatolia, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and deep into the Indian subcontinent. This imperial perception of a world dubiously dubbed "Persianate" (and more accurately as the "Persian cosmopolis") implicates an understanding of world literature from a decidedly non-European and non-Eurocentric vantage point. Understanding the details and the contours of this perception of world literature radically destabilized the idea of World Literature as we have received and read it from Goethe to Damrosch. These Persianist literati, operating mostly out of Iran, have worked through a conception of Persian empire that is rooted in history but that has long since lost its territorial cohesion and political magnitude to the vagaries of other imperial and colonial encounters. Today, ethnic nationalism of various sorts has cast a dubious shadow over this Persian imperial past, as deeply political ideologies draw subnational proclivities toward supranational aspirations as Kurds, Turks, Arabs, Baluchis, and so on seek their own ethnic nationalist pride of place. The more these subnational agitations announce and proclaim themselves, the more they trigger that imperial past—and thus the more they agitate the imaginative legacy that has been at work through Persian literary humanism. The epistemic foregrounding of this Persian cosmopolis has been as productive and generative of ideas, scholarship, textual hermeneutics, and critical thoughts as has the equally imaginative foregrounding of "Western Literature" at the roots of World Literature as we have received it today. One writes primarily in Persian, while the other does the same in English: They are both imaginative, rooted in a political anxiety that animates them both but each in different ways. The world at large knows of one (because of the imperial range of the English language) and remains mostly unaware of the second (because of the insularity of the Persian language to its imperial past). For the world to get to know the second we have no choice but to deliver its historical evidence and geographical provenance in English, the hegemonic language of the other. But the point of the exercise is not simply to offer one imaginative world literature for another, but to measure and map the imaginative imperial geographies of both as well as the ideological foregrounding they both share and project. That is the way out of the cul-de-sac of pitting one imperial World Literature against another—and it is the way to reach for the literary provenance of the real world that is staring us in the face. And thus, it demands and exacts a different way of reading the world we actually inhabit and the literature that it produces.

There is another film, Luis Buñuel's *Phantom of Liberty* (1974), that best represents this state of surreal affairs. In it we are witness to a series of nonlinear

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episodes that consist of entirely unrelated vignettes coming together to suspend credulity and reality so as to form their own phantasmagoric filmic visions of the world. The result works as a cinematic suspension of reason and sanity to question the apparatus of power that operates behind such claims to consistency and credulity. In the case of the World Literature we have inherited from Eurocentric scholars, the phantom of authenticity they declare and practice appears as outlandish as Buñuel's bold and bizarre film. It is therefore long overdue to declare that the emperor of World Literature is entirely naked and has no claim to legitimacy anywhere in the world, except on myopic and self-indulgent American university campuses. We are all overdue for a reality check.

One more cogent case before we move on: In his groundbreaking book *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011), the eminent semiotician and critical theorist Walter D. Mignolo has demonstrated how, coterminous with the historical epochs of the European Renaissance and Enlightenment, the economic and cultural condition of coloniality gathered ideological momentum around the fiction of "the West" as the Hegelian telos of world history. As Mignolo poignantly details in his argument, this condition of coloniality has now ended through the combined forces of decoloniality the world over. The idea of World Literature, however, still feeds on that phantom matrix of power, which needed those multiple ideological forces to believe in and to sell itself to the world at large. Integral to Mignolo's project of decoloniality, from which I draw my project in this book, are the twofold tasks of (1) exposing the fiction of "the West" and (2) retrieving other bygone imperial imaginings that continue to command ideological allegiances.[5] The point of the project for me in this book, therefore, is to liberate the idea of "literature" and the practice of "the literary" from all false framings and bygone ideological foregrounding. In the words of another eminent Argentinian philosopher, Enrique Dussel, in his *Philosophy of Liberation* (1980), the *ego cogito* (I think) of "the West" was predicated on its *ego conquiro* (I conquer). My project in the present book, then, is integral to a whole greater global phenomenon of reversing that order—it is a project that aims not just to dismantle the West's imperial pedigree but to begin to think outside its broken epistemology.

Why the Idea of World Literature Still Matters

The next critical question immediately poses itself: Why bother with the vexing issue of World Literature anyway? Are we not better off just declaring the idea bankrupt and dead and moving on with our lives? No. The idea still matters because, as it is practiced and institutionalized today, it continues to center and

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celebrate one kind of literary provenance (code-named "the West") and to cast to the periphery of that illusion and to self-alienate everything else, in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. We, the scholars of that periphery, must decenter the illusion of "the West" and recenter the world, and thereby provincialize World Literature. The question is therefore: How shall we rescue and salvage a new gestation of the project from its Eurocentric roots and globalized branches? If at the root of World Literature is an imaginative empire that has called itself "the West," then the very idea of World Literature itself is a potent ideological fiction, with every word in its claims—*World* and *Literature*—emblematic of that fiction. Much of the idea of World Literature is today predicated on the creative prose embedded in the rise of the European novel as a literary form, which is not a universally valid proposition. To be sure, the novel is not a "Western" genre. It was and remains a bourgeois genre. Wherever the always-already-globalized bourgeoisie rises to social significance, so too does the novel rise to literary prominence—whether in Paris or in Cairo, London, New York, or Rio de Janeiro. In other literary worlds, poetry of a variety of sorts, ranging from lyrical to panegyrics to *masnavi*—always full of parables—and drama, epic, romance, and so on, do not fit into the model of a World Literature that looks for variations on the novel and that assimilates everything else back to it. If we look at the works of Damrosch, Moretti, and Casanova, three paramount examples, they are basically about the novels that define their takes on World Literature. If Damrosch goes to Mesopotamian *Gilgamesh* or Aztec poetry or an African novella in his typical smorgasbord style of World Literature—every single item violently taken away from its own literary and imaginative habitat and readership—the result is not World Literature but a decidedly American literature in the shadows of a dysfunctional imperial imagination.

What is lost in this enterprise of World Literature, and what must be retrieved and centered, is the rooted organicity of works of creative imagination—or what in Persian, Arabic, and Islamic philosophy we call *Alam al-Mithal*—or Mundus Imaginalis, as the French scholar Henry Corbin translated the original term of Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi's (1154–91) coinage. I borrow the term *Mundus Imaginalis*, or *Alam al-Mithal*, from deep inside Islamic philosophy and, more particularly, from the Illuminationist/*Ishraqi* philosophy of Suhrawardi and, beyond that, from the transcendental philosophy, or *hikmah al-muta'aliyyah*, of Mulla Sadra Shirazi (1572–1641) to posit the "imaginal world," as Suhrawardi and Shirazi do, as the intermediary world between the material and intellectual worlds. This Mundus Imaginalis is where I propose the propensity to posit ideas such as World Literature resides, when the proposition is not rooted in reality or material evidence but instead predicated on the abstract entities that

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craft an existential evidence beyond the reach of evidentiary domains. That *Alam*, that *Mundus*, that *world* is what is so terribly and crudely violated by the kind of World Literature that mostly Eurocentric literary scholars champion, theorize, and practice. Theirs is a cannibalizing project, cutting and pasting pieces of other worldly literatures, rooted in their own *Alam al-Mithal*, and feeding them to their gargantuan chimera with its insatiable appetite for an exotic food they call World Literature. The project of world literature has to be saved and salvaged from this imperial hubris cast in literary theoretical terms—if for no other reason than to restore the totality and infinity of the worlds that World Literature has robbed and distorted from around the globe. One crucial function of the present book is to stage one such worldly literature that has been systematically violated anytime the idea of World Literature as it is practiced today has gone anywhere near it. But that project is only secondary to my primary purpose, which is to show the power of imaginary empires and ideological convictions in forming the very assumptions of World Literature.

Many of the debates and contestations regarding World Literature have taken place chiefly among European and American literary critics gathered around the Rhine or else the Charles or Hudson River, with people around the world waiting on the sidelines as bystanders bemused by these arguments about their literatures, about which they seem to lack any opinion of their own. Most recently, starting with Manfred Schmeling's edited volume *Weltliteratur heute: Konzepte und Perspektiven* (1995) and Casanova's *La republique mondiale des lettres* (1999/2007), we are witness to the internal dynamics of the European domain addressing the issues of World Literature from a decidedly European point of view—even when an edited volume includes non-European perspectives. With Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000), Damrosch's *What Is World Literature*? (2003), and Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003), we reach the US scene—where the same Eurocentric critical perspectives are advancing at full throttle. From there, other European and US scholars have joined the debates, with Christopher Prendergast's edited volume *Debating World Literature* (2004); Moretti's *Maps, Graphs, Trees* (2005); John Pizer's *The Idea of World Literature* (2006); and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen's *Mapping World Literature* (2008) marking key moments in the debate. With Damrosch's *Teaching World Literature* (2009) we see how the debate became definitive to the business of teaching World Literature on US university campuses; and with Theo D'haen, Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir's edited volume *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (2011), the debate became widespread and even institutionalized.

Things did not remain that way, and soon, with D'haen's *The Routledge Concise History of World Literature* (2011); Eric Hayot's *On Literary Worlds* (2012);

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D'haen, César Domínguez, and Thomsen's edited volume *World Literature: A Reader* (2013); and Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek and Tutun Mukherjee's edited *Companion to Comparative Literature, World Literatures, and Comparative Cultural Studies* (2013), the canonized conception of World Literature began to pay closer attention to its flawed and outdated Eurocentricity. Emily Apter, meanwhile, upped the ante, and in her seminal intervention *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2014), brought the debate around this Eurocentricism to its cul-de-sac—and pointed to new critical directions. But as Damrosch persisted in this tiresome Eurocentricity and, in fact, went positively Phileas Fogg with his *Around the World in 80 Books* (2021), far more serious scholars went through a major epistemic breakthrough, and with the publication of Pheng Cheah's *What Is a World? On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (2016), we finally arrive at a major event in radically reconsidering the very idea of "the world" and its literatures. Entirely independent of Cheah but in a similar vein, I addressed a similar issue in my essay "Where Is World Literature?," which was published in *Islam and New Directions in World Literature* (2022), edited by Sarah R. Bin Tyeer and Claire Gallien. With Gesine Müller, Jorge J. Locane, and Benjamin Loy's edited volume *Re-Mapping World Literature: Writing, Book Markets and Epistemologies Between Latin America and the Global South / Escrituras, mercados y epistemologías entre América Latina y el Sur Global* (2018), the issue was now completely outside the communion of European- and US-based scholars and their falsely presumed suzerainty over the subject matter. J. Daniel Elam's *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth: Anticolonial Aesthetics, Postcolonial Politics* (2020) also marked a landmark event, challenging the whole premise of European literary imagination. My own book on *The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature* (2019) was published at the same time; there I, too, seriously question the applicability of the field of Eurocentric World Literature to any significant text like the Persian *Book of Kings*.

As is evident from these vanguard events turning the discipline around, the incurably Eurocentric idea of World Literature, as we have received it, today domesticates and provincializes other (ideas and conceptions of) world literatures and casts them as national allegories—precisely at a time when "Europe" itself, as an outdated allegory and a threadbare metaphor, has been exposed for its own provinciality. This literary outcome of a colonial relation of power between Europe and non-Europe is first and foremost flawed because it is blind to the worldliness of other forms of world literature, both classical and contemporary, and by virtue of its hegemony in the global market, it distorts the way the world reads such literary realities and legacies. The more "Europe" is exposed for its own

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provincialism, the more adamant these Eurocentric literary scholars become in reasserting the ideological foregrounds of their World Literature. Restoring the historical worldliness of violently distorted literary traditions needs a double-edged sword both to discredit and overcome this flawed conception and to put forward the detailed maps of the worlds that this flawed relation of power has systematically distorted. Building on the extraordinary work already done by critical postcolonial thinkers, the task of the next generation of literary scholarship is therefore to overcome this cul-de-sac and to move beyond the dead ends of World Literature. The world and its effervescent world literatures (in plural) are awaiting a renewed critical thinking.

Decolonizing World Literature

In the more recent, far more serious and potent, critical thinking about world literature, a number of key issues have been raised. While Pheng Cheah questions the spatial formation of "the world" in the proposition of World Literature, J. Daniel Elam radically alters the very assumption of "literature" and offers a tapestry of the contrarian pedigree that "recovers a genealogy of anticolonial thought that advocated collective inexpertise and the unknowing." Elam rightly excavates the subaltern of world literature, of writing under duress, in exile, in prison, under torture, and facing the firing squads. This is a bold and brilliant liberation of the idea of world "literature." The collective work of writers in this caste was, however, far more effective and consequential than Elam acknowledges. These critical thinkers are contesting the outdated, reactionary, but still lucrative and dominant items in the prevalent domain of World Literature and, as such, are effectively dismantling the Eurocentric blind spot of all those who have cornered a global market for their loud and clear conception of what they continue to call and sell as World Literature. Where or what exactly is that "world"—we are now ready to ask—and what constitutes the literature it contains?

My project in this book is similar in purpose to those of Cheah and Elam, but it differs in perspective and method. In this study, I wish entirely to dismantle the delusory world at the center of Eurocentric World Literature that, at least in Damrosch's most recent work, has gone unabashedly colonial and Orientalist. By mapping out in detail the contours of the Persian literary imagination, I wish to do two things at the same time: (1) detail the map of a literary world that World Literature distorts, disregards, and in fact cannot even imagine, and (2) show how other forms of imperial imagination have produced similar conceptions of their world literature. In doing so, I am exposing the imperial foregrounding of

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any and all claims to world literature, while also questioning the very institution of "literature" as we have received it from the selfsame Eurocentric thinking. The body of my book therefore consists of the literary logic of a different world that has been epistemically violated by the Eurocentric claims to World Literature. I therefore seek to retrieve that world and that literary imagination that the imperial foregrounding of Eurocentric World Literature has effectively denied, denigrated, dismissed, concealed, and at best also cannibalized. By revealing that different world, I am retrieving the Mundus Imaginalis (the real world of literature) that gave birth to it, and I posit it as a vastly different modus operandi of literary production. Cheah is right in questioning the location of world literature, but he is still trapped in the Europocentric foregrounding of that world. Elam is right in teasing out the contrarian literary world of anticolonial struggles, but he too remains limited to a contravariant position predetermined by the Eurocentric World Literature we know today. To overcome that imperial project we not only need to opt for a radical contemporaneity—we also need to retrieve the lost worlds violated by the imperial underpinning of Eurocentric World Literature as effective strategies in re-reading our own (emerging, evolving, disappearing) worlds. It is not just the word *world* that needs to be questioned. It is also the location of *literature* that needs to be unpacked and de-Europeanized. By shifting the focal point away from literature and onto *Alam al-Mithal* / Mundus Imaginalis, I therefore wish to bring attention back to the world of creative imagination where any conception of literature is happening—whether the presumed hegemony of Western imperialism or the phantom evidence of the Persian imperial imagination—and, via this pivoting toward the Mundus Imaginalis, move the physical back to the metaphysical world, where fact and fiction, real and unreal, have a whole different take on the realities we live. The task is to overcome all fake claims on world literature so that the world we today inhabit crafts its own poetic, aesthetic, and literary forcefield.

Consider how Damrosch writes his World Literature in light of a dysfunctional US empire, his prose enabled by it, while Moretti does the same in light of a global imaginary called the world-system, and as Casanova imagines a "world republic of letters" to be a reality unto itself, centered around Paris, independent of economic forces and factors and their contingent relations of power, and yet she still recognizes that some languages—all European—have more pronounced presence in her world literature than others. These worlds are all imagined—on the model of the "imagined communities" of Benedict Anderson.[6] But this imagined world is a slanted world, privileging one as First World and the rest as Second and Third Worlds, with First World theorists writing in English, French, or German about the rest of the world, to whose languages and cultures they

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are mostly alien. Over the last century or so, Iranian literati too have imagined Persian literature in the shadow of a phantom Persian empire—an imaginary empire that has had historical antecedents, now receded into distant collective memories of multiple nations. To be sure, when Persian poets and prose stylists were writing, they thought they were writing in and for the world at large—even though they were writing from Shiraz, Isfahan, Tabriz, or Nishabur. But in the aftermath of Eurocentric literary historiography, suddenly "all Third World literature" became "national allegories," as Frederic Jameson (now infamously) thought.[7] This has never made much sense for Persian, Arabic, Chinese, or any other literature that was cast in imperial not national disposition of their own vintage.

Over the last few decades, I have on multiple occasions questioned the universal validity of the idea of World Literature as we have received it from an irreparably Eurocentric tradition. The response to the "Western" perspective, I have suggested, is not an equally ideological "Eastern" perspective or an "Asian" or "African" or "Latin American" one, or even a more generic "Epistemologies of the South" (whatever that may mean)—least of all an Iranian or Arab or Muslim perspective. We need a serious and far more radical questioning of the very ideological foregrounding of the legacy of Eurocentric World Literature, from Goethe to Damrosch, rather than a cloning and replication of it. We need to theorize world literature as if we are doing it for the first time, and this time around, that "we" is not European or Eurocentric—nor is it Eastern, Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, or Persian. By offering this perspective on the premises of the philosophical proposition of a Mundus Imaginalis, I am placing the word *world* and the idea of *literature* on an entirely different platform. An Arabic or Persian or Chinese consciousness that sees itself as the descendant of an imperial past with critical and historical awareness of itself is useful only to the degree that it helps us recast the whole project: Put one alternative world literature mirror in front of the dominant World Literature so it can see its flawed ideological features. This is an epistemic strategy, not a theoretical destination—which is somewhere entirely different.

The point here is to see how—under the shadow of a phantom empire that no longer exists and has never existed with a solid political reality, except as the conjuring of an ideological conviction—literary works of art have found their meanings and significance. That phantom empire has in fact been far more important and productive than any actual empire. The rise and fall of the literary glories of Persian literature have been entirely contingent on specific dynastic histories and not on any imperial context. The Samanids, the Ghaznavid, the Saljuquid, the Safavids, the Timurids, the Mughals, and so on—they have been

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the political and patrimonial context of Persian literary masterpieces. There has been very little literary evidence from the Achaemenids to the Sassanids left for posterity—and the best of what has survived has resurfaced in the masterpieces of Persian literature like Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* or Fakhr al-Din As'ad Gorgani's *Vis and Ramin*. But through that phantom empire, a widely productive literary imagination has been at work—in which Ferdowsi in Khorasan, Nezami in Azerbaijan, Jami in Herat, and Amir Khosrow in Delhi have all been in prolonged historical conversations with each other because of their organic rootedness in the Mundus Imaginalis they have imaginatively shared and not because of the singularity of any empire that ever held them all together. In this transhistorical conversation we have pre-Islamic Iranian and ancient Greek sources coming together in Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* and from Ferdowsi reaching Nezami, from Nezami passing to Jami, from Jami to Amir Khosrow, and from there to the Italian composer Giacomo Puccini. There is no empire holding these diverse masterpieces together. There is only a Mundus Imaginalis that, upstream from the authors' and works' historical conception and reception, has held them embedded in a dialogical imagination.

The case of the Persian literary imagination as a particular surfacing of the Mundus Imaginalis also resolves the vexing issue of Orientalism in a crucial, if surprising, way. Edward Said gave altogether too much power to European and American Orientalists and the importance of their work. The Persianist literati were fully aware of these Orientalists but were not beholden to them. A major British Orientalist like E. G. Browne (1862–1926), the author of the monumental four-volume opus *A Literary History of Persia*, took his historiographical cues from the leading Iranian scholar Mohammad Qazvini (1877–1949)—not the other way around. It is not so much that Europe or its ideological psychosis "the West" did not exist for these Iranian literati; rather, what is crucial is the confidence and self-assuredness with which they encountered and surpassed it, by virtue of the catholicity and globality of their own vision of the world. While living and thinking and writing in the claws of colonialism, these Iranian literary textualists, theorists, and historians were effectively writing under the shadow of a phantom empire of their own—one that was no longer there in reality but compellingly present in historical imagination. They faced the phantom of an empire ruling their world with the specter of another empire that had come before it. Persian empires from the Achaemenids to the Sassanids in all their historical might and widespread dominion of the globe are vicariously and metonymically evident in the minds of these Iranian and Persianist scholars as they address the documented contours of what it means to do and to be literary. Any Persian text we take is set in a global context of its own—a context that is epistemically

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violated when we pluck a text from it and place it inside some other illusory context called World Literature, where it can no longer remember its own history because it has been lobotomized. Consider the fact that the text of *Kelilah and Dimnah* has had multiple renditions: first from Sanskrit to Pahlavi, then from Pahlavi to Arabic, then from Arabic to Persian, and then to scores of other languages directly from the Sanskrit. Take also the *Shahnameh* from its Pahlavi sources to Persian, from Persian to Arabic, and from that Arabic to the critical edition prepared by al-Bundari al-Isfahani (d. ca. 1241), without which the work would have suffered much. Consider also all the manuscript illustrations, the oral performances, and the contemporary visual and performing meditations. This is not what happens when the Phileas Fogg school of World Literature goes near any of these texts. Said's critique of Orientalism was all good and necessary, but at the same time, it allotted European Orientalists too much leverage in closing in on texts they could not read without deworlding, deboning, and cannibalizing them. The power of the Orientalists was never in the perspicacity of their capacity to read but in the long canons behind the barrels of which they hid when collecting and stealing manuscripts for their European libraries.

The reconstitution of this shadow world in the light of the real world happens during much of the nineteenth century through a widespread body of travel literature, when Persian-speaking travelers from Iran and India traveled around the world and remapped it for their contemporaries.[8] Theirs was the prose of the Persian cosmopolis, a world literature in the making in real time. These travelers crafted the prose of their historicality. They were the real conduit recasting the worldly consciousness of generations to come. They usually left from Iran or India, headed first to Russian and Ottoman territories, and from there reached Europe; some of them sailed as far as the United States and Brazil, and some even reached China and Japan, after which they also sailed down Africa as far south as South Africa before they sailed north to perform their pilgrimages in the Arab and Muslim world and then returned home. From Hajj Sayyah (1836–1925) to Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–69), these travelers roamed around the globe and wrote in detail their observations of where the world was headed. They remapped and reimagined the world for their readers. Meanwhile, leading members of the emerging literati like Mirza Abd al-Rahim Talebof Tabrizi (1834–1911), Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1854–97), and Mirza Habib Isfahani (1835–93) were opening new horizons in the literary and political imagination of their time. Just a generation later, leading literary scholars like Mohammad Qazvini (1876–1949), Qassem Ghani (1893–1952), Mojtaba Minovi (1903–77), Badiuzzaman Forouzanfar (1904–70), Gholam Hossein Yousefi (1928–90), and scores of other equally learned masters of Persian literary history unveiled the

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widest spectrum of their collective memories. Almost at the same time, Sadegh Hedayat (1903–51) and Nima Yushij (1895–1960) were discovering the more liberating literary and poetic possibilities of their inherited language—and soon after that, learned scholars like Ehsan Yarshater (1920–2018), Abdolhossein Zarrinkub (1923–99), and Mohammad-Reza Shafi'i-Kadkani (b. 1939), again among scores of others, began turning their inherited literary world into the substance of their scholarship and their expansive visions of the world they inhabited. The postcolonial literary world thus had a complete map of the globe all centered around Persian language and literary culture. If the idea of world literature is still to have validity, we need to unveil the Mundus Imaginalis at the heart of such worlds and the phantom empires they imagined before it enabled and delimited (at one and the same time) their reading of any literary texts they had inherited.

The Qur'an in Persian: The Modus Operandi of the Mundus Imaginalis

How might we imagine a world literature not in the shadow of any phantom empire, not enabled and delimited by it, past or present, but resisting all such imperial framing of literary imagination by means of the aesthetic and epistemic forces internal to works of literary art? The question is not about the literary works themselves but rather about the manner of reading, envisioning, and framing them. Reversing and overcoming the imperial framing of literary works in the way Said enabled in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) would create an entirely different way of reading them: a contrapuntal way of reading them, as Said would say, namely, positing a postcolonial person as the principal interlocutor of the text and reading the text against the grain of the way it was crafted, curated, canonized, or even meant to be read. It would be a reading in which the political unconscious of the text, as Jameson would say, is defiant not complicit, and in which Jameson's own flawed conception of the Third World has already folded and collapsed into the First World.[9] All the hitherto dominant ideas of World Literature are imperial, understood in the shadow of a phantom empire—whether for or against it (Damrosch's imperialist and Said's anti-imperialist readings alike). We need to dismantle and reverse that framing to see how a whole new way of reading opens up.

Reading the textual evidence of world literature contrapuntally, from *Gilgamesh* to the Mahabharata to Homer, down to our own times, is necessary but not sufficient. We need to allow the internal world of the text to inform and agitate the world of its author and the worlds of its subsequent generations of readers.[10] The internal world of the text, the *intentio operis* (as Umberto Eco calls

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it), is, I wish to propose, predicated on the idea of a Mundus Imaginalis through which we can see the internal dynamics of an imaginal world not contingent on any imperial order and worldview of the author or the reader—for which reason it is the primary victim of the homogenizing power of Eurocentric World Literature, which turns everything it reads from around the world into raw material (like gas and oil and minerals) for its own productive machineries. The idea of Mundus Imaginalis emerges from the metaphysical foregrounding of a literary world, an allegorical and parabolic world. The idea was initially formulated by the lone philosopher Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi, who was killed in Aleppo in the prime of his life on the instigation of fanatical doctors of law in the service of Saladin's son, al-Malik al-Zahir (1172–1216). This *Alam al-Mithal* was the world of his own philosophical imagination, which he not only theorized in his philosophy but also performed in his own Persian allegorical stories. The idea of Mundus Imaginalis was above all perceived to be able to account for the phenomenon of *Wahy*/Revelation as the particular feature of the prose of the Qur'an. This leads back to the primordial diction of the Qur'anic text—though not in its original revelation as the Divine diction but (I contend) when it was translated and delivered into a human language, first and foremost into Persian. Historically we are told that a few verses of the Qur'an were first translated into Middle Persian (Pahlavi) by Salman the Persian, a close companion of the prophet. There are reports (but no extant evidence) of the Qur'an being translated into Greek in order to refute it. There is also a remarkable Spanish translation of the whole Qur'an by Iberian Muslims, perhaps by a certain Muhammad Rubio, written in both Arabic and in Aljamiado (Spanish written in Arabic) dating back to 1606.[11] But the first surviving and complete Persian translation of the Qu'ran is dated much earlier; it was ordered by the Samanid emperor Mansur I (961–76) and accomplished by bilingual scholars in Khorasan who also translated the canonical *tafsir* (commentary on the Qu'ran) of Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d. 923), himself of Iranian descent, into Persian. Countless other translations, full or partial, followed—among them the translations and commentaries by Najm al-Din Omar al-Nasafi, Rashid al-Din Abul Fadl al-Meybudi, and Abu al-Futuh al Razi.[12]

The key issue here are the dynamics by which—through its Persian translations and commentaries—the Qur'an was delivered from a merely Divine diction with limited human resonances into a humanly syncopated *architext*, very much on the model that the tribal Arab patrimonialism of early Islam assumed and adopted as the Sassanid imperial character.[13] How did that altering of the language as the "hermeneutic horizon of undertaking" (per Hans-Georg Gadamer) occur? The idea of the Qur'an as a literary text was most recently theorized by the

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eminent Egyptian hermeneutician Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd (1943–2010), based obviously on its Arabic original.[14] But long before that, the Qur'an as the modus operandi of a cosmogonic sacred imagination has offered an architextual blueprint for the literary disposition of Muslim culture at large. I have already written extensively on how the Qur'an set the discourse for parabolic storytelling. In my essay "In the Absence of the Face," I have also offered a semiotic rather than a hermeneutic reading of the so-called broken letters / *huruf al-muqatta'ah* of the Qur'an with particular emphasis on the Surah Yusuf/Joseph (Qur'an 12).[15] But here, in this book, I wish to draw attention to two crucial issues that have contributed to the constitution of the text of the Qur'an as an architext beyond but still through its scriptural (sacred) state of exception: (1) its earliest translation and exegesis in Persian, and (2) its most significant theorization by a non-Arab Iranian literary theorist, Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (1009–81), to whom Arabic was not a mother tongue but an acquired language of scholarship, not unlike English to me, as I write this book.[16] The first factor consolidated the Arabic script (not language) as the semisanctified text for the Persian language (consider the fact that we have the earliest signs of Persian also being written in the Hebrew alphabet), and the second theorized the Qur'an not beyond but through its Arabic provenance and thus cross-universalized it beyond its particular local revelatory nativism.

The Qur'an, I contend, had to be translated into Persian, the language of a vast imperial imagination, for the Muslim sacred text to become de-nativized, de-sanctified, made human.[17] The architextuality of the Qur'an, beyond its scholastic utilitarianism in Islamic law and theology, was almost entirely indebted to its translation and exegesis into Persian and its subsequent theorization by an Iranian structural linguist, grammarian, and philologist—a native of Gilan in Northern Iran who never so much as set foot outside his hometown of Gorgan, which was Arabized as "Jurjan" in his last name. That architextuality became, in turn, the locus classicus of a philological imagination that carved and crafted a worldly domain for the Qur'an far beyond its scriptural limitations as the sacred text of a patrimonial religion. The Qur'an, in short, and with it Islam, became a universal proposition and a world religion (per Max Weber) by virtue of this translation into Persian, a nonspiritual, nontribal, and entirely historical and human language vastly at work in the Persian cosmopolis.[18] It was through these Persian translations and al-Jurjani's seminal texts *Dala'il al-Ijaz / The Proofs of the Miracle [of the Qur'an]* and *Asrar al-Balaghah / The Secrets of Eloquence* that the Muslim sacred text assumed the status of its foundational architextuality.[19] The false and misleading idea that Persian is a "vernacular" language to the centrality of Arabic is historically and categorically flawed. Persian translations

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and exegesis of the Qur'an were not a vernacular version of the original. They in fact did precisely the opposite: they universalized the Divine language of the Qur'an by rendering it into human terms. The idea of Persian as a vernacular language is a misleading and unfortunate faux pas, a symptom of an aggressive Christianization of Islam and, alas, a deeply Orientalist perception of Persian literary history and geography. If anything, the Arabic Qur'an was instrumental in the early rise of new Persian from Middle Persian (Pahlavi) to renew its vast imperial claims far beyond the reach of early Arab conquests, as is evident in the earliest translations of the Muslim sacred text into Persian poetry—against the specific instructions of the Qur'an itself.[20]

Persian has never been a vernacular language, and it became even more universal after the Arab conquest of Iran. Persian has always been an imperial language, thus conscious of itself, especially when applied to translating the Qur'an. From its Avestan origins to its Pahlavi rendition, to its final gestation in the Persian we speak today, the language is deeply steeped in its cosmic and imperial heritage. As a language that extends from the Mediterranean to Anatolia and Transoxiana to the Indus Valley, as a language of royal courts, monumental histographies, sublime poetry, metaphysics, philosophy, mysticism, art, architecture, science, and technology, it is not vernacular. Even in relation to the Arabic of the Qur'an, and particularly in relation to the Arabic of the Qur'an, Persian is not vernacular—unless we Christianize the Qur'an and declare all its renditions done in *lingua vulgaris* (common people's language). Quite to the contrary, Persian is the universal language that humanizes the revelatory diction of the Muslim sacred text. *Vernacular* is defined by the *OED* as "the language spoken by the common people of a particular region or country, especially when it's not the official or written language. Vernacular languages are often used in storytelling traditions and ethnic literature, and they reflect the cultural identity and everyday experiences of the people who speak them."[21] This is not Persian. Considering Persian a vernacular (particularly in relation to the Arabic Qur'an) is an unfortunate sign of scant familiarity with the long pre-Islamic and non-Islamic history of the language and its literary, philosophical, and poetic history in the vast span of the Persian cosmopolis. The hasty application of the term *vernacular* to Persian compared to Arabic is a flawed extension of the Latin logic of considering Italian as the *lingua vulgaris* compared to Latin. Persian is not like Italian nor is Arabic like Latin. This is an uncritical and mechanical extension of European and Christian (deeply Orientalist) terminology to Persian and Islamic contexts. Calling Persian vernacular is like calling Islam "Mahometanism." A major translation of the Qur'an into Persian after al-Tabari's is the eleventh-century masterpiece, Shahfour ibn Taher Asfraini's *Taj al-Tarajim fi Tafsir al*

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Qur'an li'l A'ajim / The Crown of Translation on the Interpretation of the Qur'an for Persians.[22] In one of his four introductions to this translation, Asfraini gives an account of the significance of translating the Qur'an into Persian. Read carefully, texts such as Asfraini's and countless other translations and exegeses of the Qur'an could not possibly be considered vernacular.

Given the enormity of the available evidence, now the subject of an encyclopedic body of archived translations and commentaries on the Persian renditions of the Qur'an, we need to consider the Persian takes on the Qur'an as unique architextual renditions of the Divine diction of *Wahy* in decidedly human terms. Travis Zadeh's significant work of scholarship, alas, hinges on the unfortunate cliché of the "socio-linguistic process of vernacularization as it relates particularly to the Qur'an."[23] This is deeply misleading and sends a new generation of Qur'an scholarship in the wrong direction. What happens in the process of navigating between the revelatory language of *Wahy* and the human diction of Persian is far too exquisite to be wasted on such Orientalist clichés. Zadeh's final insight is, consequently, self-negating: "Persian translations were not designed to be autonomous or independent. They succeeded in conveying the meaning of the Qur'an while guarding the sacredness of the Arabic."[24] This is logical fallacy—and against every grain of critical hermeneutics. Language is the first and final horizon of being. Period. The assumption that Persian scholars translated the Qur'an while safeguarding its sanctity is *precisely* the mechanism through which Persian assumes its intuition of transcendence, whether translating the Qur'an from Arabic or the Panchatantra from Pahlavi and Sanskrit. The very anxiety of these translators—"whether or not it was permissible for Muslims to use translations for recitation during the performance of ritual prayer"[25]—is the synergy of producing a Persian Qur'an, as it were, rendering the Divine into the human, making it worldly. Zadeh never abandons the anxiety of "the original" and navigates the varieties of ways in which the Persian "enwrap[s] the Arabic of the Qur'an in the melodious cadence of the Persian language."[26] Flawed is therefore the spatial metaphor of these translations being produced "far removed from the historical, geographical and linguistic origins of the Qur'an."[27] The whole world, as the sublime Muslim philosopher Mulla Sadra (1572–1641) would say, is being re-created and renewed in every instance of being.

Most of the theorization of the literary disposition of the Qur'an by Abu Zayd and others happened entirely independently of any historical awareness of the significance of the Persian translations and exegesis of the Qur'an or of the important fact that al-Jurjani was an Iranian and not an Arab philologist—this is significant not because of any ethnic sense of the person but because the linguistic disposition of the author and, therefore, in an entirely philological sense

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for the Arabic language, of thinkers like al-Jurjani or philosophers like Avicenna and Al-Ghazali, Suhrawardi, Mulla Sadra, among countless others, was for an acquired, not a maternal, language.[28] Al-Jurjani's and others' superior and staged knowledge of Arabic was in part informed by the fact that they were not native speakers of the language. It is this philological proposition of translating the Qur'an into Persian and having a Persian-speaking Arabic philologist producing a major theorization of the sacred text that foregrounds the staging of the Qur'an as an architextual site of a literary (not sacred) character. The Arabic of the Qur'an was Divine. The Persian of its translations was human. Before its Persian translations and commentaries, the revelatory language of the Qur'an was sacred, sacerdotal, divine, and it is therefore only *after* its Persian translation that we may begin to think of it in literary terms. Leading Arab hermeneuticians like Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd got in trouble with the Muslim doctors of law to the point of being "excommunicated" because they were reading the Arabic Qur'an in Arabic literary terms—what had been done in Persian hundreds of years earlier and about which (alas) they were seriously ill-informed. This simple fact has alas been lost to the limited Orientalist encounters with the same archive. Here, Gérard Genette's articulation of architext is quite helpful in the way he connects it to his other key conceptualizations of the text:

> Under *transtextuality* I also include—using the obligatory term *metatextuality*, modeled on language/metalanguage—the transtextual relationship that links a commentary to the text it comments on. . . . Under transtextuality I put still other kinds of relationships—chiefly, I think, relationships of imitation and transformation. . . . For lack of a better term, I'll christen them *paratextuality* (which to my mind is transtextuality par excellence). . . . I put under transtextuality that relationship of inclusion that links each text to the various types of discourse it belongs to. . . . It stands to reason that we should call this the *architext*, and architextuality, or simply architexture.[29]

Trafficking to and from *transtexuality* to *paratextuality*, *metatextuality*, and ultimately *architextuality*, and of course entirely unbeknownst to his provincially French mind, Genette has given us ample ways of thinking between the revelatory (Divine) language of the Qur'an and its Persian (human) translations and commentaries enabling thinking about the disposition and space where the status of the Muslim sacred text as an architext is defined and located. It is important to keep in mind that by "translation," I do not mean just those done verbatim or interlineally or in any other ways closely tied to the Arabic. Rumi's *Masnavi*, for example, has been called (and rightly so) the "Quran in Persian";

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and texts such as Sana'i's *Seyr al-Ebad*, or Najm al-Din Razi's *Mirsad al-Ibad* (all these exquisite masterpieces of Persian prose and poetry) expand and enhance the sacred text far beyond its Arabic reach and sacred precincts. The Persian renditions of the Qur'an would never become or assume any status of architext, except through their intertextuality with the Qur'an. As such, these translations always remain human to underscore the sanctity and holiness of the Divine Word to which they allude. The interface or intertextual dialectic between the two languages, in this case, the Divine/Arabic and the human/Persian, and their respective provenances, becomes architextual and physical. The result is the transcendence of the Qur'an's sanctity from its Arabic provenance and thus transition toward a literary architextuality that in effect stages the revelatory disposition of the Qur'anic *Wahy*, or Revelation, bringing what the Qur'an itself calls *Umm al-Kitab* or *Lawh al-Mahfouz* (the "Protected Tablet," its archetypal blueprint) to its human destination and provenance.

I am therefore offering the architexture of the Persian translations of the Qur'an in its active *transtextuality, metatextuality*, and *paratextuality* combined as a modus operandi of Mundus Imaginalis, where the practice assumes a self-transcended gesture toward a world that is textually constituted and not politically contingent. In the architexture of the Persian readings of the Qur'an, the Mundus Imaginalis assumes a reality sui generis, a dynamic world unto itself. It is through these Persian translations that Mundus Imaginalis becomes universal by its intuition of self-transcendence from the Divine into the human. Persian translations, in effect, universalize the sanctity of the scriptural *Wahy*/Revelation beyond its internal, self-referential, divinity. I have already argued how Islam as a floating signifier plays a significant role in this redefinition of world literature through the polyvocality of its literary traditions.[30] The dialectic between *Donya*/World and *Din*/Faith, or this and the other world, is the way this transtextuality operates. That dialectic is at work in the Arabic/Persian, or *Wahy*/Revelation front of the Divine into the human. Based on Gadamer's privileging of the concept of "prejudice" in a hermeneutic sense, and on Eco's multiple reflections on translation (but especially his idea of the intention of the reader), in my essay "Found in Translation" I dwelled on the world of the translation as the locus where meaning takes place.[31] But here I am moving on to the dialogical space, in Mikhail Bakhtin's conception, between the Divine and the human as the locus where meaning, as heteroglossia, takes place—in effect, as a conversation between "I and Thou" in Martin Buber's sense of the dialogue.[32] This "I" speaks Persian, as that Divine "Thou" reveals in Arabic. In that dialogue, the divine message becomes human.

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The architextuality of the Qur'an is contingent on its own self-referential term *al-Mubin* / the Arbiter, with which the text identifies itself as the authority that parses light from darkness, truth from falsehood, good from evil. Take the sublime text of Najm al-Din Razi's *Mirsad al-Ibad* as just one example among a myriad of others, where Razi turns the Qur'anic account of the creation of humanity into a sublime love story between God and his first and final creation: Man. That covenant was not just between God and Man. That conversation was between the Qur'anic revelation and Persian prose and poetry. The world that this organic dialectic generates and sustains is a world sui generis, beyond all light and shadow of imperial meanderings. Any text placed in the frame of *world literature* rooted in this dialectic begins to mean and signify from a Mundus Imaginalis cleansed of all political vagaries.

The Argument in a Nutshell

To summarize, I have the following fourfold objectives in this book: First, I radically question the current, irredeemably Eurocentric, actively racialized conception of World Literature that, to serve its own flawed epistemic privileges, has seriously damaged and distorted our liberating conceptions of the multiple, nondenominational, nonsectarian, nonprovincial, nonracist facts and prospects of world literatures in which literary acts are performed welcoming their own alterities rather than belittling and alienating them—a signature definition of World Literature in its current Eurocentric legacy. Second, I offer a detailed account of a similarly ideologized rendition of Persian literature cast within a different imperial setting, initially instigated by European Orientalists, a mirror image of "the West," as it has been framed over the last two centuries by Orientalist and nativist historians alike. Third, I then reverse that imperial cast of Persian literature and offer an alternative, architextual, reading of its textual evidence, which reveals its innately pluralistic, happily cosmopolitan, factually multicultural, and irreducibly worldly disposition toward neighborly hospitality, where the three adjacent worlds of the author, the text, and the reader fruitfully fold into each other. Fourth, and finally, I offer the idea of Mundus Imaginalis from the depth of Perso-Islamic philosophy as the theoretical foregrounding and the prototype of seeing world literature as a case of architextual hermeneutics rooted in the Persian reception, rendition, and encounter with the Qur'an, as a case where and when the Divine (Arabic) meets the human (Persian) in a joyous mystic embrace. I offer this embrace as the hermeneutic Eros for reading world literature as the locus classicus of the coming together of the sacred and the social,

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the divine and the mundane, the visual and the verbal, the holy and the homely, the foreign and the familiar, the uncanny and the liberating. Take a look at my table of contents now, and you will see how, in its tripartite division, the seeds of the book are outlined: how blindly following Orientalist imperial predilections, Persian literary imagination was embedded in a false imperial framing and its liberating stories became positivist histories; how the actual worlds of Persian literary imaginations have survived that forced framing; and finally, how the defiant texts have occasioned a succession of moves away from forced framings, pivoting toward literary stylistics leading to textual criticism and, finally, to literary hermeneutics. That is the outline of the story I wish to share in this book. Now to deliver!

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Notes

INTRODUCTION. MUNDUS IMAGINALIS AS WORLD LITERATURES

1. See Hamid Dabashi, *The Shahnameh: The Persian Epic as World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).

2. The term *Mundus Imaginalis* was first used by the French Orientalist Henry Corbin in his "Mundus Imaginalis, or The Imaginary and the Imaginal," originally delivered at the Colloquium on Symbolism in Paris in June 1964, which subsequently appeared in *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme* 6 (1964): 3–26. The version I cite is available online at http://www.bahaistudies.net/asma/mundus_imaginalis.pdf. The complete text has been published in Henry Corbin, *En Islam iranien: Aspects spirituels et philosophiques*, vol. 4, book 7 (Paris: Gallimard, 1971). Almost at the same time the eminent Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman wrote on the same topic in his "Dream, Imagination and Alam al-Mithal," *Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (1964): 167–80.

3. I have recently detailed the parabolic disposition of this Mundus Imaginalis in my *Persian Parables: Form as Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2026).

4. See Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review*, January/February 2000, https://newleftreview.org/issues/ii1/articles/franco-moretti-conjectures-on-world-literature. See also Gayatri Spivak, "Close Reading," *PMLA* 121, no. 5 (2006): 1608–17, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25501633.

5. In my book *The End of Two Illusions: Islam After the West* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022), I attended to the first of these two tasks, and in this current volume, you might say, I turn to the second.

6. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).

7. Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* 15 (Autumn 1986): 65–88.

8. I have studied these travelogues in detail in my *Reversing the Colonial Gaze: Persian Travelers Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

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9. See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994); and Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982).

10. In Dabashi, *The Shahnameh*, I developed this idea of the three worlds of the author, the text, and the readers based on Umberto Eco's idea of the intention of the author, intention of the text, and intention of the reader. For more on Eco's idea, see Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, translated by Anna Cancogni (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

11. See Consuelo López-Morillas, *El Corán de Toledo*: *Edición y estudio del Manuscrito 235 de la Biblioteca de Castilla-La Mancha* (Gijón: Ediciones Trea, S. L., 2011).

12. The most extensive studies of the Persian translations of the Qur'an are of course written in Persian by mostly Iranian scholars in Iran, among them Azartash Azarnush's monumental study *Tarikh Tarjomeh az Arabi beh Farsi: Az Aghaz ta Asr-e Safavi / History of Translations from Arabic to Persian: From the Beginning to the Safavid Period*, vol. 1, *Translations of the Qur'an* (Tehran: Soroush Publications, 1996); and Mohammad Ali Reza'i Isfahani, *Manteq-e Tarjomeh-ye Qur'an / The Logic of Translating the Qur'an* (Qom: Global Center for Islamic Studies, 2007). These, however, are just the tip of the iceberg. There are massive multimedia encyclopedias of Qu'ranic studies (particularly translations and commentaries in Persian) in literally hundreds and thousands of volumes. There is nothing in any other language that comes even close to this spectacular body of scholarship in Persian and Arabic. However, the recent work of Travis Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), is indeed a remarkable achievement of his exceptional scholarship in English, though alas seriously compromised by his false and misleading assumption of the Persian versions of the Qur'an being "vernacular." The Persian language and any work done in it are, of course and most certainly, not *vernacular* in any understanding of the term. Vernacularizing Persian renditions vis-à-vis the revelatory (*Wahy*) language of the Qur'an is the most blatant form of boldly Christianizing Islam and carelessly Europeanizing Islamic history. More on that in this text.

13. See Gérard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, translated by Jane E. Lewin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

14. For a seminal work of Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, see his *Mafhum al-Nass* (Cairo: Al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-Arabi, 1990). For a pioneering discussion of Abu Zayd's ideas, see Navid Kermani, "From Revelation to Interpretation: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd and the Literary Study of the Quran," in *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, ed. Suha Taji-Farouki (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 169–92.

15. See Hamid Dabashi, "In the Absence of the Face," *Social Research* 67, no. 1 (2000): 127–85, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40971381.pdf.

16. For an excellent examination of Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani's work, see Lara Harb, *Arabic Poetics: Aesthetic Experience in Classical Arabic Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Harb is currently translating al-Jorjani's masterpiece *Asrar al-Balaghah / Secrets of Eloquence*. Before Harb, Kamal Abu Deeb's *Al-Jurjani's Theory of Poetic Imagery* (Oxford: Aris and Phillips, 1979) was an equally insightful study of al-Jurjani's work.

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17. I am here making a case precisely in the opposite direction of what Travis Zadeh makes in his otherwise excellent monograph *The Vernacular Qur'an*, which is primarily concerned with how juridical and theological debates in Arabic informed the development of Persian translations and commentaries of the Qur'an, which he erroneously considers "vernacular."

18. The idea of the "Persian cosmopolis" was first theorized by Richard M. Eaton in "The Persian Cosmopolis," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History*, February 23, 2021, https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277727.013.402. Equally detailed and insightful is Eaton's other essay on the subject, "The Persian Cosmopolis (900–1900) and the Sanskrit Cosmopolis (400–1400)," in *The Persianate World: Rethinking a Shared Sphere*, ed. Abbas Amanat and Assef Ashraf (Leiden: Brill, 2019): 63–83, https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004387287_004.

19. See Ayman A. El-Desouky, "Between Hermeneutic Provenance and Textuality: The Qur'an and the Question of Method in Approaches to World Literature," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 16, no. 3 (2014): 11–38.

20. See Ahmad Ali Raja'i, *Poli mian She'r-e Haja'i va Aruzi-ye Farsi dar Qorun-e Avval-e Hijri*: *Tarjomeh'i Ahangin az Do Jos' Qur'an-e Majid / A Bridge Between Prosodic and Syllabic Persian Poetry in the First Hijra Century: A Musical Translation of Two Segments of the Holy Qur'an* (Tehran: Bonyad Farhang, 1974).

21. *Oxford English Dictionary*, "vernacular (*adj. & n.*)," December 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1309095969.

22. See Shahfour ibn Taher Asfraini, *Taj al-Tarajim fi Tafsir al Qur'an li'l A'ajim / The Crown of Translation on the Interpretation of the Qur'an for Persians*, ed. Najib Mayel Heravi and Ali Akbar Elahi Khorasani (Tehran: Miras-e Maktub, 1996).

23. Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, xviii.

24. Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, 20.

25. Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, 53.

26. Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, 293.

27. Zadeh, *The Vernacular Qur'an*, 584.

28. For a review of the state of literary scholarship on the Qur'an, see Travis Zadeh, "Qur'ānic Studies and the Literary Turn," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 135, no. 2 (2014): 329–42.

29. Genette, *The Architext*, 82. All emphases are mine.

30. See Hamid Dabashi, "Where Is World Literature?," in *Islam and New Directions in World Literature*, ed. Sarah R. Bin Tyeer and Claire Gallien (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University press, 2023), 265.

31. See Hamid Dabashi, "Found in Translation," *New York Times*, July 28, 2013, https://archive.nytimes.com/opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/28/found-in-translation/.

32. On dialogic space and heteroglossia, see Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981). Martin Buber's book *I and Thou*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scriber, 1970), first appeared as *Ich und Du* (Leipzig: Insel-Verlag, 1923).

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