GLOBAL SOUTH STUDIES

Impossible Professions

By Ramsey McGlazer | May 19, 2023

There is a phrase I overuse. It's "master class." Too often, I'll trot it out to praise a friend's essay in progress or to show appreciation for a passage I'm teaching. "This paragraph is a master class," I'll say, in class, of a virtuosic reading by Erich Auerbach. Or I'll write in a review, in an effort to convey my sense of an author's rhetorical gifts: "The introduction is a master class."

Reading J. Daniel Elam's *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* made me want to give up the phrase for good. Or rather, Elam's book taught me to ask a series of questions about what it would mean to take distance from the figure of the master and the fantasy of mastery. What is teaching when it's not a performance of expertise or an exercise of authority? How can we "stop and leave" our current Master Classes (118)? How, conditioned as we are to value mastery, can we unlearn the imperative and the impulse to deliver such classes, to demonstrate what we know, whether to "prove" or simply to share it? And what should we do with our ingrained — perhaps inevitable — admiration for the virtuosos in our lives? Are there times when it's worth distinguishing between two forms of mastery, aesthetic and political, or between expertise, on the one hand, and domination, on the other?

To ask these last questions is implicitly to identify a tension sustained throughout Elam's study, which is a virtuosic critique of virtuosity, a magisterial takedown of the *magister* in his various (gendered) guises: as author, as authoritative critic, as colonial administrator, as "economic man," as "autonomous, self-knowing individual" (14). Elam considers an alternative ethos developed by a cast of minor characters: avid and proudly "immature" readers (10), inexpert philologists, offbeat librarians, and the members of anticolonial study groups whose engagements remain "dependent, deferential, impure, and fleeting" (16).[1] Even while *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* celebrates these figures and recovers their centrality to a range of interwar projects — both intellectual and political, both anticolonial and antiauthoritarian — there is a pathos to the motley crew's appearance in a single-authored scholarly monograph. Such a book has to have an author, and the author, who must be vetted, cannot be altogether inexpert. He cannot "refuse the calls of authorship" in order to "remain a reader" (5). He cannot, like Har Dayal, "refuse[] an authorial position in favor of a multitude of authorial voices (none of which … belong to him)" (24). But Elam's reader senses his solidarity with these refusals. It's as if his were a book that would have preferred not to be one, by an author who would have preferred to be part of an obscure undercommons, "an anonymous, … multitudinous collectivity" (9).

This tension is one of many things that make *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* so moving and persuasive: for all its sophistication, range, and conceptual force, the book is bravely willing to remind us of what it would rather be, which is also, I think, what it might have been under another dispensation. What would humanistic study be like under

institutional conditions that allowed for the broad, democratic distribution of “enjoyable practices, abundant personal liberties, frivolous demands, and expansive sociality” (15)? What form could a monograph take if it did not have to be a master class and could be truly provisional, part of an ongoing, open-ended, anonymous, and raucous collective conversation?

I have been suggesting that Elam’s book manages to envision and proleptically to enter that kind of conversation even while noting the factors that make it so difficult to sustain in the present. Among these factors, Elam contends, is a widespread insistence “on consequential values to-be-accrued, the imperious demand that criticism be instrumentalizable, and that subjects render themselves recognizable” (15). These demands discount forms of reading that are not results-yielding (which means most forms of reading, for Elam), and they condescend to forms of activism that do not seek state recognition. By contrast, Elam’s book is guided by the conviction that

> Politics can be “the art of the possible” for those whose lives are secured by the state or, in other words, only for those who can confidently know that they will live to see the “possible” attained. Those whose lives are not guaranteed by the state, or those whose lives the state actively expects to end, cannot afford the luxury of such politics. The “wretched of the earth” require, instead, a politics of the impossible. (2-3)

Here the impossible does not preclude action; it prompts “action in relative opacity” (4), “action in the present” (9). It asks us to abandon, in other words, the myths of clarity, calculability, and futurity that motivate politicians, university administrators, and many defenders of the humanities (15). The alternative that Elam proposes is a politics of friendship, and although it is practiced by those who “cannot afford the luxury” of uncritical belief in the art of the possible, it opens onto a kind of “communal luxury, or equality in abundance” (Ross 2016, 63). The university in its current form militates against this equality, separating those deemed worthy of admission from those who are not, sorting those rewarded with abundance from those relegated to situations of scarcity.

To be clear, I am not equating academic precarity with being someone whose life “the state actively expects to end” (Elam 2020, 3). I am instead observing that Elam’s book speaks to the former condition as well as the latter. This is already, indirectly announced in the book’s title, where — as in “Italian for Beginners” or “Physics for Poets” — the preposition points to a potential student body. *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* does not simply notethe abiding intimacy between states (colonial and otherwise) and universities (public and private), which reproduce inequality. The bookalso engages in a thought experiment, challenging us to imagine the kind of institution that would welcome the wretched of the earth and offer training in, of all things, literature.

In order to appreciate the stakes of Elam’s thought experiment, we can look to Frantz Fanon’s account of how decolonization brings about the refusal of colonial values:

> The colonialist bourgeoisie had hammered into the native’s mind the idea of a society of individuals where each person shuts himself up in his own subjectivity, and whose only wealth is individual thought. … Brother, sister, friend—these are words outlawed by the colonialist bourgeoisie, because for them my brother is my purse, my friend is part of

> my scheme for getting on. The native intellectual takes part, in a sort of auto-da-fé, in the destruction of all his idols: egoism, recrimination that springs from pride, and the childish stupidity of those who always want to have the last word. (Fanon [1961] 1963, 47)

It might at first seem strange to bring this passage into conversation with reflections on the fate of the academic humanities, reflections that so often center on neoliberal universities in the Global North. But I would wager that, for anyone who has recently been in a graduate seminar or attended a job talk or a visitor's lecture at one of these universities, it is not at all hard to see how, far from having been destroyed, the bourgeois "idols" that Fanon decries still stand tall. To say this is not to cast aspersions on individual colleagues; it is to note that, in what Elam calls "the continuous colonial present" (18), individualism shapes academic conversations, monographs, and markets alike.

We can read *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* against this background and as a response to it. If today the university remains, with exceptions, "a society of individuals … whose only wealth is individual thought," Elam calls for the decolonization of this society, and he does so by studying those who spoke the "words outlawed" under colonial rule: "Brother, sister, friend."[2] This is not often what's meant by the call to decolonize the university or the curriculum, but Elam's book shows compellingly that any decolonization worthy of the name would need to include, or perhaps begin with, a transformation of subjectivity, an alteration of the "imperious" habits that we have learned, the hierarchizing styles of thought that we have internalized and reproduced. These, Elam suggests, are among the material conditions that determine academic consciousness. His work shows that one corrective is reading.

For Elam, reading is inseparable from, sometimes even coextensive with, critique, and it is a comradely undertaking. To read is to become "sociophilic" like B. R. Ambedkar (63), "to consort in collective unknowing" like M. K. Gandhi (82), to enter into conversations with real or imagined interlocutors. These conversations can of course involve conflict, or debate of the consequential kind staged in Gandhi's *Hind Swaraj* (88). But in Elam's book the stress falls on "inconsequence," in Anne-Lise François's sense and Leela Gandhi's, and on the shared pleasures of reading.[3] This pleasure persists even in the midst of conflict or when the reading project in question is "impossible," whether because of the planetary scope of its ambitions or the unrealizable nature of its (anti-teleological) aims.

In a move that beautifully redoubles the practices that he analyzes — Gandhi's listing of "Some Authorities" (86-87) or Bhagat Singh's composition of a commonplace book (98) — Elam brings Auerbach and Fanon together. He reads and rereads *Mimesis* alongside *The Wretched of the Earth*, splicing fragments of the two texts together and collating their claims. These are his chosen, non-authoritative authorities, the books that he seems to keep permanently open, arranged side by side, on his desk. Importantly, it's Elam's interest—or what Auerbach would call the "specific purpose" by which he's "guided"—that authorizes the arrangement (Auerbach [1953] 2003, 556). No scholarly norm sanctions it. What grounds the comparison is simply Elam's reading, and the pairing illustrates his claim that reading is an exercise in "sociophilia" (Elam 2020, 49, 63-66), a form of association in the double sense of conceptual linkage and intersubjective alliance. In this way, Fanon, the theorist of revolutionary violence, comes to share page space with Auerbach, whose "playing as it were with [his] texts" makes a different kind of sense in Fanon's vicinity (Auerbach [1953] 2003,

556). This “playing” becomes legible as deeply serious and even in its own way revolutionary, with implications for the world beyond “the West.”

More generally, Elam argues, quoting Auerbach, that comparative philological criticism and anticolonial thought are commensurable if not convergent: “Philological and anticolonial critique, asserting their status as ‘provisional and incomplete,’ are aesthetic and political projects without guarantees” (107). Here he is pairing Auerbach with Singh rather than with Fanon, but his conclusion is consistent with his reading of Fanon’s work. Both philological and anticolonial critique, he writes, address “a world that *must* be otherwise, and so impossibly otherwise that we must commit to it without being its *figura*: We can neither prefigure nor preauthorize it. Instead, we might invest in the non-instrumentalizable virtues of reading, with and for others — whom we can neither know nor authorize [for] admission into this amorphous ‘us’” (107). Asking us to imagine counterfactually that there could be *amor* in the amorphous as he puts the *philia* back into philology, Elam writes a love letter to two critical traditions. In the process, he shows us how and why we should set aside the figure of the critic as overweening, unloving, and unlovable, a caricature that is central to many versions of “postcritique.”[4] Far from entailing arrogance and the denial of affect or attunement, critique, for Elam, is a humbling practice, undertaken “with and for others.” As a means by which to cultivate “non-instrumentalizable virtues,” it is an ethical exercise that puts us in touch with other readers and strengthens our commitment to projects that are no less necessary for being “impossible.”

But how can we commit to a world that we cannot even pretend to prefigure? And how can we know that the virtues we cultivate will not be instrumentalized? In my own work, I have tried to trace the co-optation of pleasure and play in particular, asking how, under both liberal and fascist regimes, these become alibis for the operations of authority (McGlazer 2016; 2020). Or think of how recreational down-time comes to function as an occasion for momentary recharging, making us that much more efficient when the work week begins. As D. A. Miller writes in another context, “at least since the eighteenth century, play usually trains us for work,” and forms of reading that revel in unknowing and deferral “may only bind us more profoundly to a society that thrives on delayed and ever-incomplete satisfactions” (Miller 1988, 89, 97). In this sense, projects that know themselves to be provisional and incomplete may still be amenable to co-optation by capitalism.

Even if, as Elam argues, “to read, to critique, is to relinquish one’s self-mastery,” nothing guarantees that this state of surrender will be open-ended (129). But this is part of what Elam means when he refers to “projects without guarantees” (107), and to note this absence of assured success is simply to repeat what Elam’s extraordinary epilogue makes clear: that it is supremely difficult to “stop and leave” the world we know (118). I have suggested that this world is, in Elam’s book, also implicitly a university, one that continues to administer master classes. Elam’s “impossible subjects” are thus also practitioners of what Freud called the “‘impossible’ profession” that is education (Freud [1937] 1964, 248). Or rather, they might teach us even while abandoning all claims to authority, in another social world of students, teachers, friends. “He longs for friends,” Elam writes of Auerbach (129). So do those of us left teaching in a university that must be otherwise.

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[1] For a beautiful essay on the minor that also learns from and responds to Elam’s book, see Skaria 2022. I am grateful to Ajay Skaria and to Sharad Chari for bringing *World Literature for the Wretched of the Earth* to my attention.

[2] For recent confirmation, see Clover 2022.

[3] See especially Francois 2008 and Gandhi 2014.

[4] For more on this caricature and for a critique of its prevalence, see Kurnick 2020, especially pp. 354-55.

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