Introduction: Formations of the Literary Sovereign

On January 15, 1784, as part of his inaugural address as the first president of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta, Sir William Jones outlined the primary research program to be undertaken by the members of the Society.[1] The meeting was carefully planned. Following an invitation from Robert Chambers – the acting chief justice of the Supreme Court of Judicature of Bengal and Jones's acquaintance from his Oxford days – twenty-nine men assembled that evening in the Grand Jury Room of the court to constitute a learned society. No doubt, many of those prominent merchants and administrators of the English East India Company were attracted by Jones's reputation as a polymath and a literary celebrity in England. Described by the preeminent eighteenth-century critic and lexicographer Samuel Johnson as "one of the most enlightened of the sons of men," Jones was part of a circle that included, apart from Johnson, some of the most illustrious men and women of his contemporary London: Joshua Reynolds, Edmund Burke, Hannah More, Edward Gibbon, Elizabeth Carter, and James Boswell.[2] Even before he reached Calcutta on September 25, 1783, at the age of thirty-six, Jones was the celebrated author of a French (and later English) translation of a Persian biography of the Afsharid monarch Nader Shah, a popular Persian grammar in English, translations of poems from various Asian and European languages, treatises on ways to suppress political riots and the principles of governance, legal tracts on the laws of bailments, and numerous poems, pamphlets, and essays in English, French, and Latin that displayed his classical education at Oxford as well as his remarkable talent for language learning. In addition to this fame, he had received his knighthood just a year earlier – at the king's levee of March 20, 1783 – in recognition of his administrative acumen as the Commissioner for Bankruptcy. With a curious mix of legal and literary fame, Jones was an unusual addition to the colonial settlement in Calcutta.[3]

What probably intrigued the gathering even more was the charismatic prodigy's dramatic vision of a sea voyage from Europe, entering the

"amphitheatre" of Asia, where "*India* lay before us, and *Persia* on our left, whilst a breeze from *Arabia* blew nearly on our stern." While this almost epiphanic experience of being "encircled by the vast regions of *Asia*" triggers "a train of reflections" with "inexpressible pleasure" for him, Jones cannot but lament that, with the current paucity of reliable knowledge about those regions, "how important and extensive a field was yet unexplored, and how many solid advantages unimproved." But he has a hope – despite his apprehension that "it might have [an] appearance of flattery" to the congregation of men that evening, he nevertheless tells them that he harbors the belief that if any serious inquiry "into the history and antiquities, the natural productions, arts, sciences, and literature of *Asia*" were to be made, and if a group of capable men were to be assembled to accomplish this arduous mission, he had his best chances among his own "countrymen in *Bengal*." He raises the stakes even higher by comparing the new Society with the Royal Society of England – he reminds his audience that the venerable English society, just like the one being proposed in front of them, also had a humble origin in "a meeting of a few literary friends at *Oxford*," but it "rose gradually to that splendid zenith, at which a *Halley* was their secretary, and a *Newton* their president." This new Society in Calcutta, he wishes, will eventually achieve similar sagacity and eminence.[4]

Jones's inaugural "Discourse" highlights two aspects of eighteenth-century empires and their material-discursive networks that I find particularly important for my argument in this book. He illustrates the first one when he speculates on the possible name for the Society and observes: "if it be necessary or convenient, that a short name or epithet be given to our society, in order to distinguish it in the world, that of *Asiatick* appears both classical and proper, whether we consider the place or the object of the institution, and preferable to *Oriental*, which is in truth a word merely relative, and, though commonly used in *Europe*, conveys no very distinct idea" (3: 5). Coming from one of the leading orientalists of the Enlightenment era, this outright denunciation of the "Oriental" is no doubt surprising. But it is also apparent that this rejection is meant to be a ground-clearing exercise, an intellectual *Aufhebung* of sorts, to usher in a new regime of knowledge characterized by the shift from conventional "Orientalism" to clearly bounded territorial inquiry. Indeed, the way he marks this shift, and conjures Asiatic territories as the putative object of the Society's "investigations," one cannot but feel that he is perhaps describing one of the maps that will soon adorn the walls of the learned society – taking India as his vantage point, he presents a panoramic view of the continent that includes vast regions like China, Japan, Tibet, Persia,

the Arabian Peninsula and so on (3: 3–4). As we shall see below, this cartographic underpinning of a new regime of knowledge will soon saturate the daily business of colonial governance, and its longevity will transform the modes of knowledge production across the colonial divide, bringing together diverse histories and disparate territories.[5]

Perhaps Jones was inspired by the cartographic revolution since the eighteenth century and was referring to the new thickness maps had achieved since then.[6] At the same time, his seamless mixing of territorial and cultural representations, mediated by colonial institutions and officials, also pointed toward a new idea of territorial opacity and a new regime of knowledge that was not reducible to any orientalist antecedent. Rather, this new logic of territoriality was based on the colonial government's insistence on turning the land under its possession into anthropological *fields* of investigation and research, leading to a specific form of territorial governmentality. Jones was familiar with many of these works authored by Company officials in India: apart from James Fraser's *The History of Nadir Shah* (1742), John Zephaniah Holwell's *Interesting Historical Events, Relative to the Provinces of Bengal, and the Empire of Indostan*, 3 Vols. (1765–71), and Alexander Dow's *The History of Hindostan*, 3 Vols. (1768–72) and *The Tales Translated from the Persian of Inatullah of Delhi* (1768), he also knew some recent works such as Nathaniel Brassey Halhed's translation of a digest of Hindu personal law as *A Code of Gentoo Laws, Or, Ordinations of the Pundits* (1776) and *A Grammar of the Bengal Language* (1778). In addition, he possibly had access to some more translations from Arabic and Sanskrit into Persian.

In other words, Jones's formulation presupposed these works and hence was indicative of the idea that the colonial state in British India, much like professional anthropology, treated its territories as some sort of *Gestalt* that needed to be interpreted with standardized methods and expert investigators. Moreover, the transformation of territories into knowledge objects had an additional consequence – as another colonial official and prolific writer, William Wilson Hunter, put it succinctly, this new model of governance made it obligatory for British civil servants to devote themselves, simultaneously, to both "public work" and "services to scholarship" in their efforts to uphold "British suzerainty."[7] In sum, Jones's address defined one of the most crucial features of modern colonialism – that colonial governance was progressively a combination of political and nomological decrees, being simultaneously the site and source of new knowledge. Colonial governments became not only the preeminent authority but also the sole proprietor of this new knowledge about whatever lay under their possession.

However, this emphasis on local governance is by no means a sign of discursive insularity. Jones quickly introduces the second critical component of imperial networks by arguing that this bounded territory under the watch of its colonial masters is not as provincial as his description may suggest. Hence, almost in anticipation of what Raymond Schwab calls the "Oriental Renaissance" that will soon traverse the boundaries of Asia and Europe in the final years of the eighteenth century, and in which Jones himself will play a crucial role, he offers this additional rider: "since *Egypt* had unquestionably an old connection with this country [i.e. Hindustan or India], if not with *China*, since the language and literature of the *Abyssinians* bear a manifest affinity to those of *Asia*, since the *Arabian* arms prevailed along the *African* coast of the *Mediterranean*, and even erected a powerful dynasty on the continent of Europe, you may not be displeased occasionally to follow the streams of *Asiatick* learning a little beyond its natural boundary" (3: 4–5). Jones shortly discovered through his own work on comparative philology and law that these links between Asia and Europe were more than "occasional," and it was indeed difficult, if not downright impracticable, to disengage the contiguous lines of knowledge production across continents.

This idea of conjoined and comparative histories found its climactic expression two years later in his well-known "Third Anniversary Discourse" (1786) at the Asiatic Society, when he proposed a rudimentary structure of what later became the "Indo-European hypothesis" (3: 24–46). His suggestion of a linguistic family comprising Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, Old Persian, and other languages became so popular that it permeated almost every branch of human sciences around the turn of the century.[8] Goethe, who appreciated and imitated both Hāfiz and Kālidāsa via Jones's translations, observed that "[w]hoever knows others as well as himself must also recognize that East and West are now inseparable."[9] And, by 1808, Friedrich Schlegel had not only endorsed Jones's speculation on linguistic families, but even made a programmatic announcement: "The dwellers in Asia and the people of Europe ought to be treated in popular works as members of one vast family, and their history will never be separated by any student, anxious fully to comprehend the bearing of the whole."[10] Jones's inaugural "Discourse" thus characterized the newness of the colonial project on its own terms: the new knowledge about India, or any other colony for that matter, would henceforth be poised on this double register – its internal transformation through philological and anthropological governance, and its embeddedness within broader geopolitical networks. It would be challenging to accomplish one

without the other, and it would be even more difficult to think of knowledge in its local isolation.

I begin with this meeting of the Asiatic Society, and especially with Jones's "Discourse," for a number of reasons, but most importantly for the way it captures the connected and supranational – or one could say, global – context of this book. As my brief overview of Jones's lecture shows, the imperial structures necessarily crossed spatial boundaries and produced a wide range of cross-cultural institutions, governmental practices, laws, texts, and subjects that marked the newness of the regime. Within this transition, and as part of the trans-continental connections, proliferated new ideas and discourses that carried the traces of this cultural encounter and became noticeably mobile across territories. It is this material condition that functions as the bedrock for this book. What Jones describes as the two nodal points of modern imperialism – colonial governmentality and conjoined yet comparative histories of empires – constituted the field within which I trace the genealogy of the idea of the "literary," its transformation from being what Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* defined as "Learning; skill in letters" in 1755 to its almost exclusive reliance on the tropological dimension of language by the end of the century.[11]

My wager in this book is that the modern idea of the literary as a *sovereign order of textuality* since the late eighteenth century – autonomous, autotelic, and singular – was coproduced with an extraordinary model of colonial sovereignty at a place where Jones lived and worked during the final decade of his life, namely the far-flung colony of British India. The new colonial regime, as Jones points out, was poised on its ability to turn the territory into a readable space – with its cartographic and textual signs overlaid on each other – and on the ambition of constituting a totalizing schema of representation. At the same time, as his other point reminds us, such a fundamental transformation of the colony could not have been possible either in its territorial seclusion or within any single domain deemed to be properly governmental. Hence, drawing on disparate resources including local legal canons, "oriental" scribal cultures, Indian "manners and customs," English common law, European aesthetics, and the changing character of colonial occupation across continents, the new regime gave birth to what I call the *literary sovereign*. Within this new idea, the colonial administration sought to bring together political sovereignty and literary singularity, with the further aim of constituting a thoroughly textualized sovereign power modeled on what the colonial translators identified as a self-governing literary language evident in a host of Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic texts. No doubt, this resolution was designed as a response to

a number of crises the Company faced at the time, but its other outcome was decisive – it defined literary language within an autonomous, non-mimetic, and performative mode of textuality and constituted the modern field of "literature." The literary sovereign, in other words, set out two templates at the same time – one for colonial governance that would be repeated in different parts of Asia and Africa in subsequent centuries; and the other for the new idea of literature that would soon transform cultures across the colonial divide.[12]

I track the proliferation of this model of the literary sovereign then through the conceptual grid of *Weltliteratur* or world literature and show how this colonial history made its mark across literary cultures in Europe.[13] From the eighteenth century onward, this colonial history shaped and reshaped literary cultures at a global scale, and laid the foundations of what can be defined as the modern culture of letters.

Historians have argued that the specificities of colonial rule in the eighteenth century were determined by what is often called the "ideology" of early colonialism in the Indian subcontinent. During this period, and before settling for an unbreachable colonial "difference" in the nineteenth century, the colonial administration often overlapped with or appropriated what were seen as typically Indian practices and values.[14] This was evident in the construction of the literary sovereign as well. The model of state-based sovereignty popular in Europe since the Westphalian peace in 1648, and described by Hegel in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* (1821) as the effect of the "ideality" of a perfect "*Rechtsstaat*," faced serious challenges in the colonies during the eighteenth century.[15] In India, unlike in previous British colonies in Ireland, North America, and the Caribbean, the crisis was much more acute since a public joint-stock company with monopoly rights assumed a quasi-state status and performed some of the activities – from collecting revenues to waging wars – that were associated exclusively with the state in European political imagination.

This unusual status of the Company led Edmund Burke, one of its fiercest critics, to allege that the Company was in possession of "[t]hose high and almost incommunicable prerogatives of sovereignty, which were hardly ever known before to be parted with to any subjects, and which in several states were not wholly intrusted to the prince or head of the commonwealth himself." As a consequence, he famously declared, the "East India Company in Asia is a state in the disguise of a merchant. Its whole service is a system of public offices in the disguise of a counting-house."[16] In a similar vein, Adam Smith noted in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) the "strange absurdity" of the

Company that treated the "character of the sovereign as but an appendix to that of the merchant."[17] This scandalous model of what historians have variously called the "dual sovereignty" or diarchy, the "company-state," a "distant sovereignty," or simply "anarchy," therefore, needed an equally unusual resolution.[18] It was also evident that this resolution could not have come either from normative legal–juridical discourses in Europe or from political institutions like the parliament and monarchy.

In my opinion, the key to understanding the colonial resolution to this rather elusive problem is the Company's investment in large-scale translations of local legal canons such as the Shari'a and the Dharmaśāstra (representing Islamic and Hindu laws, respectively) and its subsequent attempt to link these laws to what the administrators often called the "manners and customs" (the eighteenth-century name for *culture*) of indigenous populations. In 1772, while facing multiple crises at home and in the colony, Warren Hastings, the first Governor General of Bengal, sought to anchor the new regime within local legal traditions and proposed his "Regulations" to follow indigenous manners, understandings, usages, and institutions.[19] Hastings even claimed to have unearthed the "Ancient Constitution of the Country" and proposed to overhaul the administration of the new colony on the basis of this doctrine.[20] It was further held that the foreignness of Hindu and Islamic laws could be tamed only if one knew enough about the equally foreign cultural matrix within which they operated and, consequently, the colonial claim to sovereign power could be secured only if its new legal regime could be shown as originating from these ancient but continuous cultural roots. The cultural universe of India, according to Hastings's plan, had to function both as an internal framework for the new colonial regime and also as the eventual horizon of its political ambition. Any claim to sovereign power for the Company had to navigate this essential duality of culture.

What Jones describes as the transformation of colonial governance through philology and anthropology in his "Discourse" became especially useful in this context, and soon the colonial administrators not only translated native legal, religious, and cosmological texts but also wrote copious grammars and dictionaries of local languages with the belief that such philological tools were necessary techniques of governance. Through a remarkable assortment of legal and cultural registers, the Company established a Janus-faced regime – while the origins of its sovereign power could be traced back to India's ancient legal systems, its "rule of law" was modern enough to distinguish itself from various precolonial administrations. It was the strategic deployment of local culture as a justificatory narrative for

its rule as also its final governmental telos that allowed the Company to secure such a unique form of sovereignty.

My name for this colonial resolution – the *literary sovereign* – is designed to map this new concept of power across the abstraction of law and an anthropological description of culture. While working on local "manners and customs," many of the colonial administrators identified a distinctly "Oriental" or "eastern" mode of writing, especially in poetry, that collapsed the ontic and the phenomenal aspects of a language in the very act of its performance. In stark contrast to the neoclassical aesthetic ideals of contemporary Europe, this mode of writing did not follow the principle of mimetic representation and certainly did not adhere to any classical model of order and decorum. Instead, what one encountered in such texts was a form of allegory that did not have any secondary referent, or a metaphor that made no distinction between the vehicle and the tenor, or perhaps even a mode of language that produced meaning only within its own limits. Unlike the classical or biblical allegories that these officials knew well, the uniqueness of this kind of "oriental" writing emerged from its suspension of reference to an extratextual world, or from its manifestly autonomous and autotelic being.

Colonial officials insisted that this was not simply a generic quality, but a broader mode of being – of language and its attendant culture – that separated "oriental" writing from its European counterpart. If one were to make sense of this "singular species" of writing, one not only had to place its *performative* language (as opposed to the *veridical*) within a self-sufficient textual world, but also had to assume a cultural consensus that would lend credence to such hermetic textuality. Way before any European precedence, colonial administrators identified this sovereign order of textuality in the "orient," across texts and territories, and proposed it as the proper domain of the literary. What I call the literary sovereign in this book is precisely the overlap between this form of "oriental" writing and the new colonial sovereignty as both espoused an autonomous textual order within a specific cultural milieu and both embodied a form of truth that could have been established only across this text–culture continuum. I do not mean that one imitated the other, but I do submit that *political sovereignty* and *literary singularity* were coproduced in this case, and they reinforced each other in their respective careers.

The literary sovereign, in other words, marked a form of textuality that was radically different from contemporary standards of Europe – especially of mimetic imitation or representation – in its self-enclosed performativity, and specific to the "orient" in its cultural details. It was, however,

the potent combination of political expediency and textual autonomy in the new idea that marked its uniqueness in imperial history. Once language was dissociated from its role of mimetic representation, and once it was reimagined as a political instrument within a bounded space like the colony, it was possible for the colonial government to deploy this form of textuality to ever-expansive fields and purposes. Indeed, by the turn of the century the literary sovereign inaugurated translation and textualization as essential mechanisms of governance almost everywhere. This was of course facilitated by the Company's growing reliance on writing and print to define the distinctiveness of its rule, but this close association with governmental institutions shaped the other characteristic feature of the literary sovereign – that it became irrevocably inflected by the spirit of anthropology.[21]

In a sense, the very structure of the new textuality – and especially its proximity to political power – consigned it to such a fate, but the whole process was accelerated by the emergence of the master narrative of the time, namely the *nation*, that subsumed every other anthropological classification under its utterly seductive sway. What was a literary model of sovereignty found its final enframing in the momentous idea of the nation, and the ensuing decades witnessed the intense nationalization of an act of pure linguistic performance. Without taking into account this contiguity between the literary and the anthropological – as also their mutual imbrication in colonial governance – it would be impossible to explain why, by the middle of the nineteenth century, literatures and nations confirmed and almost implied each other. I shall even argue that the literary sovereign made available the central template for nationalist imagination and shaped the political landscape of modernity.

This book thus reopens the crucial question of the historicity of literature, but does so amidst a broader arena of multicultural and multilingual locations and within the *longue durée* of colonial histories. In standard literary history, the story of the modern idea of the literary is traced back either to the Jena Romantics and the fragments published in the *Athenaeum* (1798–1800) or to Germaine de Staël's *De la littérature dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*, 2 Vols. (1799), and it is often staged with an exclusively European dramatis personae.[22] What emerged in the final decades of the eighteenth century, and subsequently became the dominant critical idea in most scribal cultures over the next couple of centuries, we are told, is the universalization of a fragment of European history. Literature was thus soon transmuted into world literature, and its mode of being or its typical value assumed a normative standard, dictating

the fate of other and very dissimilar practices of writing, circulation, and reception. Any discussion under the rubrics of national or world literatures was, by definition, meant to pay homage to this global domination of an idea, and any critical engagement with writings from diverse regions had to be guided by this initial article of faith. It was left to literary history as a new discipline in the nineteenth century to confirm the universality of the idea of the literary, across languages as diverse as Persian, Arabic, Sanskrit, Chinese, and so on, and it became a common practice to see replications of Europe almost everywhere, producing a "world republic of letters."

As with many other universalist fictions, this story is interesting more for what it conceals than for what it tells us about the modern culture of letters. It does not tell us, for instance, how and why a provincial history of European origin found its home across continents. It does not reveal the modalities through which its defining feature of anti-historicist intransitivity was almost immediately trapped in the teleological narration of the nation and its performative energies were rechanneled as unmistakable signs of a national *Geist*. And it certainly does not disclose the way literature straddled its dual life across academic institutions and a broader world of print and publics to become one of the most powerful cultural expressions of modernity. But, most importantly, this fiction does not shed light on the contradictory prerogatives and paradoxical desires of the literary: it is born out of a sectarian history, but with universal ambition; it is part of a series of modern political assemblages (nations, empires, etc.), and offers lines of flight out of them; it promises democratic equality in its very construction, yet lends itself to be part of regressive politics; it resists historicization, but shapes literary historiography in decisive ways.

My point in this book, thus, is that in order to step aside from this Eurocentric narrative, and to decolonize the very idea of literature, one needs to go beyond Europe and before Romanticism and place the genealogy of this new cultural idiom within the histories of modern colonialism. It seems to me that, like so many other critical concepts that dominate the global intellectual discussions today, the literary as a distinct mode of being of language does not belong to any one culture or history. Instead, it telescopes a range of ideas and practices from different cultural worlds and fashions its own being through histories of violent colonial encounters in the eighteenth century. Traces of this multicultural, multilingual, and intermedial history – generated through colonial governmentality and imperial networks, as Jones suggested – are still visible in the life and career of the new concept, and I wish to capture these traces and small histories through the theoretical grid of the literary sovereign. Once the myth of