Transimperial

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THERE is no dearth, as we know, of references to "empire" in our discussion of the Victorians. The term "transimperial," however, remains relatively underused. This anomaly, I suggest, can be attributed to our critical understanding of the category of "empire" itself, an understanding that has more readily (and somewhat counterintuitively) lent itself to "global," "transatlantic," or "transnational" critical approaches rather than a transimperial one. Empire, it can be argued, functions more in a descriptive mode than an analytic. It provides an expanded canvas or site for examining "British" actions, exchanges, or negotiations and yields a logic that is more additive than comparative or contiguous. This may be so because our assumptions of "Victorian," British, and "nation" seem to cohere along a continuum that fuses a geoethnically bound sense of place with time.[1] References to empire, therefore, proceed along an accretional logic that includes what lies beyond the "nation" without adequately querying who or what constitutes "Victorian" or "British" in the first place, or if the idea of a defined nation is not a tad bit anachronistic in the context of the nineteenth century. In fact, even as ideas of the global or transnational valuably enhance the scope of Victorian studies, they can do so without necessarily troubling those spatial and temporal solidities that cohere in the name of "nation" (which tends to conflate "British" with "Victorian").

It is significant, then, to consider how empire can conceptually put pressure on the idea of the nation if we adopt a transimperial analytical framework that places Britain in constant tension and connection with its imperial constituencies (particularly those marked as the "non-West") by continually questioning the discrete solidities of the (British) nation and placing it in an inexhaustible relation of contiguity and interconstitutiveness with the empire "out there."

To be sure, for nearly two decades, literary scholars as well as historians of the British empire have prodded the boundaries of the "British" nation and, relatedly, also argued for the mutually constitutive nature of colony and metropole.[2] Empire, they have suggested, was not necessarily "away" from "home" and neither was metropolitan Englishness a discrete formation that could be considered in splendid isolation. Rather, the two need to be studied in tandem and in terms of a relation that is centripetal. The full potential of this valuable line of enquiry is yet to be realized;

in fact, it has been somewhat overridden by the rubric of the global or transnational. This is not to deny that the latter two categories have gone a long way in marking an expansive turn in the study of, amongst other things, nationally-based literatures. Indeed, they have opened up important pathways in Victorian scholarship. But it is ironic that in taking the so-called global turn, Victorian studies also seems to shy away from fully exploring how the decidedly non-national setting of empire—which, for better or worse, Victorians claimed for their own—not only renders empire an important category of analysis but also renders the transimperial a key heuristic for a global framework.[3]

In accounting for the salience of the transimperial, it is important to keep in mind that if we are to think about the nineteenth century in terms of its *longue durée* and in terms of the recursive cycles of capital accumulation that Giovanni Arrighi draws out, then it becomes clear that, even as each cycle of accumulation from the sixteenth century onward relies on an inter-state system of trade, the British cycle of accumulation of the nineteenth century (which, incidentally, extends beyond a hundred years) is marked by what Arrighi refers to as "tribute" from Britain's empire.[4] Even as this tribute is certainly not characteristic of the British cycle alone, it denotes a more complex and layered geopolitical configuration than the isomorphic statal system that the transnational assumes, even if to depart from it. In fact, the terrain of empire, where the "nation" itself is in various stages of making, unmaking, and nonmaking (and we tend to forget the latter two because of the nationalist teleology that the hindsight of the twentieth century gives us) provides a more apt lens for studying beneath, above, and beyond the nation. Such is true both of the chronological period of the nineteenth century as well as our present moment, which is not just about nation-based sovereignties, and for which the "transnational"—perhaps a term more apt for the post-World War I twentieth century world—seems a somewhat weak moniker. In other words, the nineteenth century world loops into the twenty first; perhaps we are *all* Victorian, hence all the more reason to think about the transimperial.

I suggest transimperial as a keyword that is as much about inter-imperial relations as about the relationality between multiple constituencies through and across empire. A transimperial lens of study, while certainly not valorizing "empire," nonetheless redirects attention toward, rather than away, from it. In so doing, it keeps alive the asymmetries, tensions, and collaborations that held/hold dispersed constituencies together. In other words, the transimperial genealogizes abiding

relations (often iniquitous) that tend to get glossed over or flattened by a too-easy embrace of the global.

A transimperial approach posits a relation of comparison, connection, and contiguity between different imperial constituencies through two methodological departures. First, it views the "non-West" in terms of coevality, an attribute that is not usually accorded to the episteme of the colonial. In fact, an implicit assumption of lag precipitates a culturalist disavowal of the non-West, a disavowal that interrupts otherwise putatively continuous political identities (for instance, after 1858, Indians were subjects of the British Crown, notionally on par with Britons). Consequently, a transimperial approach also deflects attention from the emphasis on flow and mobility that the transnational otherwise privileges. This is not to deny the importance of various kinds of flow—of peoples, goods, capital, commodities, texts, and ideas; rather, it is to draw attention to that which has not been so readily mobile—indigenous literary production in non-Western languages, for instance—even as it is marked by mobile processes.

A transimperial framework, then, affords the possibility of bringing together nineteenth century English and, say, Urdu literature not only in terms of parallels or similarities, but also as operating along the same interrelated plane of modernity, for which "Victorian" can function more as an ensemble or portmanteau term rather than a salutary badge of inclusion.[5] In this, sameness becomes not so much a measure of homogeneity as of proximate commonality, one that the transimperial can aim to route in all its tensions and negotiations with a systematicity that does not rely on an expansive gesture of munificence alone.

Notes

1. It is such a continuum that perhaps occasions Kate Flint's unease with the term "Victorian." See "Why 'Victorian'?: A Response," *Victorian Studies*, 47, no. 2 (2005): 230–39.
2. See, among others, Antoinette Burton, "Who Needs the Nation: Interrogating 'British' History," in *Cultures of Empire: A Reader: Colonisers in Britain and the Empire in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, ed. Catherine Hall (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000): 137–53; Simon Gikandi, *Maps of Englishness: Writing Identity in the Age of Colonialism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Bill Schwarz, "The Expansion and Contraction of

England," in *The Expansion of England: Race, Ethnicity, and Cultural History*, ed. Bill Schwarz (London: Routledge, 1996): 1–9.

3. See, among others, Regenia Gagnier, "Introduction: Victorian studies, world literatures, and globalization," *Critical Quarterly*, 55, no.1 (2013): 1–8, Sharon Marcus, "Same Difference? Transnationalism, Comparative Literature, and Victorian Studies," *Victorian Studies*, 45, no. 4 (2003): 677–86; Pablo Mukherjee, "Introduction: Victorian World Literatures," *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 41, no. 2 (2011): 1–19.
4. Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century: Money, Power, and the Origins of Our Times* (London: Verso, 1994), 55.
5. Here, I depart from Flint's formulation of the relation between "Victorian" and modernity ("Why 'Victorian'?: A Response," 233).

Uchronia

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IN 1857, the French philosopher Charles Renouvier imagined that the Roman Empire had never become Christian, in a work titled *Uchronie*, a term Renouvier invented to designate "[une] utopie des temps passés"—a utopia of past time.[1] While his tale (as this phrase suggests) was set in the historical past, literary scholars today tend to employ "uchronia" in a more expansive sense, as an umbrella category comprising alternate history stories, parallel worlds stories, and tales involving "future uchronias"; as Amy Ransom notes, "Just as the *ou-topos*, the no-where of utopia, may be either good (eutopian) or bad (dystopian), so may the *ou-chronos* rewrite the past, explore the future or lie parallel to the reader's present."[2] In our own time, of course, uchronian narratives have never been more popular—at the time of this writing, two of the most-discussed television programs on air are adaptations of Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*—while the tendency to think of reality in terms of a branching of multiple "forking paths" (in Borges's phrase) has entered into our cognitive habitus. Until recently, the emergence of uchronian themes in fiction has been largely discussed in connection with the