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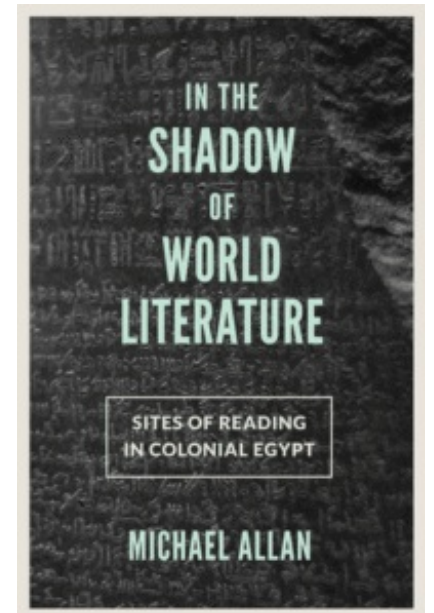
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Michael Allan's groundbreaking new book *In the Shadow of World Literature* gives us one of the most moving and powerful models in literary study of "a discipline to come." Preceded by Michael Warner's "uncritical reading" and Virginia Jackson's study of "lyricization"—in addition to work in anthropology from Talal Asad and Saba Mahmood—Allan's work excavates a Foucauldian theory of literature, what he calls "the archaeology of a discipline." This new mode turns attention from literature as a given set of texts and toward understanding "the literary" as a series of specifically trained reading practices, sensibilities, institutions, and possible subject positions. Whereas Warner provided a history of critical reading and a suggestive series of questions about literary reading, and Jackson reimagined the construction of a literary genre, Allan takes up world literature to rethink the very grounds of literature and the literary itself.



The book's examination of reading and writing in Egypt from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first does not ask scholars to merely add more texts to their canon or pursue aesthetic "world making" in novels. That model of world literature, dominant from David Damrosch to Pascale Casanova, Emily Apter, Eric Hayot, Mariano Siskind, and others, has focused too much on worlds. (Even Edward Said's "worldly texts" miss the mark in Allan's analysis.) Instead, in the shadows of this tradition, Allan uncovers a history of reading in Egypt that questions the very meaning of literature and the naturalized critical, modern, secular subject it has come to presuppose.



Like a mathematical proof, the impact of Allan's argument resides in its elegant simplicity: World literature emerges through *how* one reads, not *what* one reads. When examined from this perspective, world literature's meaning changes.

Rather than a progressive history of inclusion, world literature has colluded with colonial power to exclude certain types of reading subjects—marginalizing the illiterate, dogmatically dismissing the religious, and castigating the uncritical reader as a fanatic. Thus, more than another mode of (reparative, distant, surface, descriptive) reading, Allan's daring study insists that we reconsider how the objects we read come to be deemed "literature" in the first place, and the politics and power that inhere in such a process. In other words, Allan both intervenes in the ongoing debates about how to read in the wake of "close reading," and implicitly points to the way each of those theories fails to question the very grounds upon which they mount their challenges.

Unfolding this claim across six chapters, *In the Shadow of World Literature* exposes how literature matters as an ideological training ground in the formation of specific types of ethical subject-readers. Even the book's acknowledgements carry forward a tender, personal, and sophisticated reflection on what it means to inherit literature, to be born into print culture, and to experience books as phenomenological artifacts—imbued with odors, worn down with touch—as much as bearers of semantic contents. Such intimacy does not replace critique with identification—as some recent "post-critical" scholars have sought to do—but rather argues from the book's very beginning for an attention to the particular registers through which a text can be taken up and then circulate in the world.

While each part of the book adds to this work, the second chapter, “Translation: The Rosetta Stone From Object to Text,” most forcefully conveys the stakes of the connection between how and what we read. There, Allan narrates the discovery of the Rosetta Stone on an archaeological dig, its discussion by British and French colonialists among other objects (the initial audience was much more interested in a fossilized fish), the rubbings made of the stone’s inscriptions, the decisions to interpret those inscriptions as encoded translations, and the implications and lived effects of understanding the stone as a text. Allan unfolds the stages in this process to uncover the material and cultural interactions that linguistic anthropologists call “entextualization.” Rather than encounter the object as literary from the start, Allan’s exemplary discussion of the stone’s transformation into a text for translation shows how a series of physical processes (the invention of methods, dyes, and surfaces to transfer the stone’s markings to paper), secular assumptions (that Egyptian hieroglyphs—“the language of the gods”—could be equivalent to Greek —“the language of politics”), and pedagogical imperatives (with their institutions, marketplaces, and jargons) sediment layers of work required to constitute what comes to be called “literature.”

And in that story’s consequences—explained in Chapter Three as the colonial dismissal of Qur’anic reading practices (especially memorization) as non-literary, “fanatical,” and “primitive” against the rational and modern critical reader of literature—we discover why an attention to the sensibilities of reading matters in today’s political worlds.

Allan’s method traces these moments of entextualization not to restore them to their historical or regional contexts, but instead to reveal the mutual codetermination that understands these processes as co(n)texts, each interactively involved in the production of meaning. The notion of context as something other than a frame to decode and restrict meaning, and more as a shared element in the co-production of knowledge, is not incidental to Allan’s argument: He strives to find a formalism that keeps historical meaning alive in the present. In a counterintuitive move, he reads René Wellek’s formalist philological defense of comparative literature as the grounds to consider literature as a discipline with a history, against Edward Said’s celebration of “wordly texts” that emphasize the context of distinct national cultures and languages. Said’s critique of orientalism, in Allan’s reading, still sustains the universalism of “literature,” and therefore implicitly endorses the very colonial projects, institutional exclusions, and secular domination Allan has shown literature to enact.

Somewhat paradoxically, it is through the inequivalence and differences between cultures, the specificity of his particular “sites of reading,” and the specialization of comparative literature, that Allan points to a general reorientation of a theory and history of literature that would apply to all of the disciplines invested in the category of literature. In such a project we begin to recognize that the movement from object to text named by entextualization structures literature as an imperial ideology that not only authorizes the borders of the world republic of letters, but too often determines whether one can enter more overtly political checkpoints.

Allan never puts his claims so boldly (or garishly), but at a time when the relation between writing and politics can seem to have become more reflexive than persuasive, Allan convincingly shows how his history of literature works in the world. For instance, in the story of police violence against Egyptian students protesting what they felt was a blasphemous statement in the Syrian author Haydar Haydar’s novel *A Banquet For Seaweed* (2000), Allan finds another counterintuitive example of literature’s political force. Whereas critics from Egypt and elsewhere defended (and continue to defend) the novel’s right to free speech, Allan asks us to consider that “the debates following the events subordinated the violence against the protesting students to the violence that the protests were seen to have enacted on literature . . . In a curious twist of logic, the issue was framed as freedom of speech, but the speech to be defended was the literary and *not* the students’ protest. What was at stake was ultimately a defense of a book from its public.” World literature—that is, the community of novelists and critics across the world who spoke or wrote in support of the novel’s right to free speech—stands against, and even stands behind the violence against students who perceive the book as a “moral injury” rather than an “abstracted textual problem.”

In this depiction of a confrontation between two interpretive communities around a single artifact (a novel), Allan unsettles any easy endorsement of critical reading, and questions the expected locus of literature’s ethical value as

critique. In uncovering the archaeology of a discipline, he makes us aware of the ways the category of literature, and the power of specific types of reading (critical reading aligned with modern subjectivity, religious reading made equivalent with the “fanatic”), license violence against particular types of readers. Again, he shows how the world republic of literature—which demands a naturalized critical disposition toward objects it deems worthy of cultivating that subjectivity—can determine who is allowed entry across the political world’s borders. In this way, Allan’s book reimagines not just how we might study literature and what the study of literature might mean, but also how we might understand literature’s various functions in the world. This labor in the shadows shows us that precisely those theories of literature meant to reveal the hidden workings of political power forgot to examine the exclusionary power of their own practices. As scholars struggle to find a way to read differently—to read in ways that match their stated ambitions—they will need the new terms, histories, and methods Allan sets out in this first example of a discipline to come.