

# What Was Early Modern World Literature?

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Does our title pose a valid question? Did world literature exist during the period—roughly 1500 to 1800—that scholars writing in English have come to call *early modernity*?<sup>1</sup> Answers to this question will depend on how one understands *world literature*, a category whose meaning, scope, history, and value have been contested in recent scholarship.<sup>2</sup> In this essay, we enter the archives of early modern literature through two sets of historically contemporaneous but globally dispersed concepts of *world* and *world literature*. This endeavor is premised on our conviction that *Weltliteratur*, as articulated by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in early nineteenth-century Europe and later by Erich Auerbach, is misleadingly objective. While claiming to assemble literatures from around the world into an untiered global archive, this European vision of world literature was, as Aamir Mufti argues, the result of an Orientalist moment during which Europe “discovered” the languages and traditions of “the East.”<sup>3</sup> Like map projections, which cannot translate

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1. This question resonates with that asked in Ayesha Ramachandran, “Worldmaking and Early Modernity: Cartographic *Poesis* in Europe and South Asia,” in *The Cambridge History of World Literature*, ed. Debjani Ganguly (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming): “[Can we] identify the emergence of ‘world literature’ as a distinct phenomenon between 1450–1700, one inextricably bound up with the messy, conceptual tasks of early modern worldmaking?” (110).

2. See, e.g., David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton University Press, 2003); and Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

3. Aamir R. Mufti, *Forget English! Orientalisms and World Literatures* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 49.

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without distortion, modern notions of world literature are structured around centers of gravity, explicit or concealed, that tend to bestow perspectival privilege on European visions of a wider world. We understand the European project of *Weltliteratur* to be one among many experiments in transregional textual assemblage, which include the multilingual Babylonian archive from before the common era, the Sanskrit cosmopolis in the first millennium, and the multigenerational translation movements in fourth-century Chang-An, tenth-century Baghdad, and eleventh-century Tibet, among others.<sup>4</sup> If world literature is taken to name a set of ancient ideas and practices centered in various global locations before it became Europeanized in the nineteenth century, then there is no reason to dismiss, *prima facie*, the idea of early modern world literature.

How did early modern authors perceive or imagine relations between far-flung literary cultures? In what ways might early modern world literature have existed? We respond to this question by reconstructing concepts of world and world literature that were held independently by two poets: Bidel of Delhi (1644–1720) from Mughal India and Thomas Traherne (1636–1674) from rural England. These two figures, who were not aware of each other’s existence, wrote during many of the same orbital circuits that the earth made around the sun. Acknowledging that the term *early modern* contours modern English-language scholarly understandings of the past, we recognize that simultaneous existence on the same planet does not secure as fact the idea that both writers wrote at the same time (the late seventeenth century, early modernity). Nor does it mean that they were necessarily part of the same world. Traherne and Bidel were separated by vast historical, chronological, geographical, linguistic, cultural, religious, and literary distances. If such matters are integral to what one understands by the term *world*, then sameness, or even connectedness, cannot be assumed. Responding to a set of ongoing issues in early modern studies, in this essay we embrace the conceptual entanglement of temporalities, worlds, and archives at play in our titular “early

4. For the Babylonian archive, see Marc Van De Mieroop, *Philosophy before the Greeks: The Pursuit of Truth in Ancient Babylonia* (Princeton University Press, 2015). For the Sanskrit cosmopolis, see Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). On the translation movements in Chang-An, see Rafal Felbur, “Kumarajiva: ‘Great Man’ and Cultural Event,” in *A Companion to World Literature*, vol. 1, *Third Millennium BCE to 600 CE*, ed. Wiebke Denecke and Ilaria L. E. Ramelli (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2019), <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118635193.ctwl0312>. On Tibet, see Matthew Kapstein, “Other People’s Philology: Uses of Sanskrit in Tibet and China, 14th–19th Centuries,” in *The Space of Meaning: Approaches to Indian Philology*, ed. Silvia D’Intino and Sheldon Pollock, with the collaboration of Michaël Meyer (Paris: Collège de France, 2018), 465–94. (We thank Sonam Kachru for the last two references.) On the ‘Abbasid translation movement, see Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early ‘Abbasid Society* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

modern world literature.” We argue that it is impossible to avoid such entanglements because practices of “world literature,” whether they appear in ancient Babylonia, the Mughal Empire, or nineteenth-century Germany, always involve tendentious temporalities, privileged centers of gravity, and the creative reorganization of the past in the service of the present. Such complexities can be navigated in harmful or salutary ways.

Many scholarly attempts to bring the early modern world into view have traced patterns of circulation or translation through which early modern objects, people, texts, and ideas moved across cultural and political borders.<sup>5</sup> Others have noted the parallel development of philological techniques for relating to older traditions.<sup>6</sup> Still others have discovered shared dispositions toward authority and value manifested in cultures with few if any connecting ties between them.<sup>7</sup> In this essay, we work toward a historically grounded understanding of world and world literature by presenting a multifocal reconstruction of these concepts in the early modern period. By responding to the question of our essay’s title simultaneously from two distinct perspectives, we attempt to scramble the hierarchies implicit in many recent constructions of world literature by eschewing dynamics of core and periphery and by refusing cultural circulation as the sole warrant for comparative work.<sup>8</sup> In juxtaposing Traherne and Bidel, we reconstruct morphologically similar conceptions of world in order to bring two distinct and globally distant traditions into a relationship of mutual witnessing.

Both Bidel and Traherne ground their understanding of world in the first-person perspective. Beginning with how two ostensibly unconnected poets understand the concept of world as emerging from the positionality of their own experience, we work immanently from these first-person perspectives as we attempt to coax a new and historically grounded understanding of early modern world literature into view. During Bidel’s and Traherne’s lifetimes, concepts of world in Christian, Islamic, and Vedantic (Hindu) traditions were in the midst of what, in reference to Europe, Ayesha Ramachandran calls a centuries-long “hard-won renovation.”<sup>9</sup> Projects of enlightenment, imperial organization, comparative thinking, and

5. See, e.g., Kapil Raj, *Relocating Modern Science: Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

6. See, e.g., Sheldon Pollock, Benjamin A. Elman, and Ku-ming Kevin Chang, eds., *World Philology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); and Whitney Cox, *Modes of Philology in Medieval South India* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

7. See Rivi Handler-Spitz, *Symptoms of an Unruly Age: Li Zhi and Cultures of Early Modernity* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

8. For core and periphery in studies of world literature, see Peter Kalliney, “Introduction: Literary History after the Nation?,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 80, no. 4 (December 2019): 359–77.

9. Ayesha Ramachandran, *The Worldmakers: Global Imagining in Early Modern Europe* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 6.

self-knowledge were driven by thinking with worlds—such that, in Roland Greene’s description of this phenomenon in European thought, “it is not easy sometimes to disentangle self from world.”<sup>10</sup> Taking this blurring of self and world as our point of departure, we begin by reconstructing how Traherne’s and Bidel’s concepts of world name the relations that condition phenomenal appearance and epistemic endeavor (in distinction from globe, earth, cosmos, or universe—totalities that exist in themselves). We then show how each poet responds to experiences of diversity (across languages, religions, temporalities, and geographies) by articulating resonant concepts of world literature. Finally, we argue that these notions of world literature are structured by early modern practices of assemblage, a concept we reflexively activate in order to retune modern scholarly approaches to world literature and early modern studies.

### I. WORLDS AS INSTRUMENTS OF DIVINE SELF-KNOWLEDGE

Bidel and Traherne think the concept of world with a clarity, intensity, and flexibility that opens the possibility of an early modern world literature grounded in the phenomenal appearance of that world. In his autobiography, *The Four Elements*, Bidel offers this definition: “A world (*‘ālam*) is something that discloses a message about itself.”<sup>11</sup> A world appears to a perceiving subject tasked with interpreting its “message.” Traherne holds a similar view, systematically differentiating *world* from such terms as *earth* (the global mass on which we live) and *universe* (the possibly infinite material expanse of which the earth is a part), which refer to wholes that exist in themselves. Traherne reserves *world* for how these wholes appear to various someones or somethings. For Traherne, as for Bidel, *world* is a concept grounded in phenomenality; it names a structure of transcendence that discloses itself to creatures who live on the earth and in the universe.

The exactingness with which both poets treat the concept of world resonates with Pheng Cheah’s recent rethinking of world literature through the temporality involved in the phenomenological notion of worlding as developed by Martin Heidegger and others.<sup>12</sup> But this resonance only goes so far. Historical distance matters, and these poets’ concepts of *world* are distinctly early modern.<sup>13</sup> Traherne, for instance, claims that two worlds exist simultaneously, one atop the other: first, the God-made natural world,

10. Roland Greene, *Five Words: Critical Semantics in the Age of Shakespeare and Cervantes* (University of Chicago Press, 2013), 147–48.

11. “‘Ālam tamām ‘arż-e payām-e khod ast o bas” (‘Abd al-Qāder Bidel Dehlavī, *The Four Elements*, in *Kolleyāt*, ed. Khalīlollāh Khalīlī, 5 vols. [Tehran: Enteshārāt-e Ṭalāye, 2010/2011], 4:9). Unless otherwise noted, all translations are mine (Mikkelsen).

12. See Cheah, *What Is a World?*

13. Martin Heidegger is far from the first to broach the idea of worlding. See, e.g., Sonam Kachru, *Other Lives: Mind and World in Indian Buddhism* (New York: Columbia University Press,

a unity that envelops the creature enjoying it, stretching off into a seeming eternal infinity through a felt oceanic encounter with absolute space; and second, the man-made world, which is in fact many contingent, linguistically and culturally diverse worlds crafted by human nurture through inheritance, tradition, and custom. The latter unfolds temporally and might constitute a world in Cheah's sense. The former does not.

Bidel develops his own concepts of world within a set of inherited circumstances specific to early modern South Asia. Under the Mughal Empire (1526–1857), state-sponsored translations made non-Islamic literary and religious texts newly available in the transregional idiom of Persian. Early modern intellectuals and their readers creatively aligned the thought worlds of Hinduism with Islam in a variety of ways, and through these efforts, Persian became a medium through which concepts of world became increasingly more flexible.

The comparative element subtending these projects of worldcraft is especially evident in the *Yogavāsishtha*, an influential assemblage of Indic philosophical tales translated into Persian by Prince Dara Shikoh (1615–1659).<sup>14</sup> These tales are recounted within the frame of an extended public dialogue between Prince Rama and the sage Vasistha about Vedānta, a set of philosophical traditions that posit a unity between any individual “self” and the cosmic principle, Brahman. The stories and explanations offered by Vasistha become a therapeutic resource for Rama, who suffers from existential malaise. Perceiving the world's multiplicity, Rama describes himself as tormented by the thought that the world is in constant flux and has “no stability.”<sup>15</sup> “I don't know who I am,” Rama says to Vasistha; “this world [*‘ālam*] I see before me—why does it exist at all?”<sup>16</sup> He begs Vasistha for knowledge that will bring him composure (*jam'īyat*, “gathering” or “assembling” the self), a collected mind.<sup>17</sup> Vasistha relates how he was created by Brahman and sent to Bharata Khanda, a Sanskrit term for the

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2021), which shows how Buddhist traditions intertwined the definition of *worlds* with that of *life-forms*.

14. For Dara Shikoh's influence on Bidel, see Hajnalka Kovacs, “No Journey Is Possible outside of the Heart': The Story of King Lavaṇa in Bedil's *Muḥit-i a'zam*,” *Journal of South Asian Intellectual History* 2, no. 1 (2020): 73–115. On Dara Shikoh's life and works, see Supriya Gandhi, *The Emperor Who Never Was: Dara Shukoh in Mughal India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020).

15. “‘ālam ḡabāt o qarār nadārad” (Dārā Shikoh, *Jūg Bashist*, ed. Tārā Chand and Sayyid Amīr Ḥasan 'Ābidī [Aligarh: Dāneshgāh-e Islāmī-ye 'Alīgar, 1968], 17). On Dara Shikoh's translation of the *Yogavāsishtha*, see Muzaffar Alam, “In Search of a Sacred King: Dārā Shukoh and the *Yogavāsishthas* of Mughal India,” *History of Religions* 55, no. 4 (May 2016): 429–59.

16. “Man namī-dānam ke kīstam va īn hame 'ālam ke dīde mī-shavad az che chīz be-zohūr āmade ast?” (Dārā Shikoh, *Jūg Bashist*, 18).

17. “Del rā jam'īyat va ārām mī-dehad” (ibid., 22).

subcontinent. Dara Shikoh's translation places "Bharata Khanda" alongside its Persian equivalent, "Hindustan"—a concept premised on the idea of the subcontinent as a cosmopolitan, multiconfessional place.<sup>18</sup>

Prince Rama and Vasistha discuss a wide range of topics, including cosmology, practices of the self, and ways to attain freedom. Vasistha describes for Rama's benefit how the world (*ālam*) came to exist in time and space. In Dara Shikoh's Persian, "The spirit [*parātma*] that exists along with every thing, is called *Brahman*." Defined as a "primordial knowledge" (*elm-e azālī*), it infuses all existent things. "Infinite and varied," this knowledge "appears to itself in the mirror of illusions in the form of the world and its inhabitants." Vasistha explains that the world was crafted by Brahman because, dwelling in an undifferentiated pre-eternity, Brahman "desired to reveal itself more."<sup>19</sup> This idea parallels a famous Islamic *ḥadīth qudsī* (an authoritative saying in the voice of God): "I was a hidden treasure, and I wanted to be known—so I created the world."<sup>20</sup> Vasistha also presents the formal cause of the world's creation as divine desire for self-knowledge: in endless cosmic cycles of creation and destruction, worlds flicker into and out of existence, acting out attempts by Brahman to know itself. This cyclical process also transpires at the level of individual experience: the human mind wanders from world to world, like someone who wakes up from a dream only to realize that they are still dreaming.<sup>21</sup>

18. "Be-jehat-e ershād-e khalāyeq be barat kand ya'nī ma'mūre-ye hendūstān" (ibid., 48). The idea of "Hindustan" as a place where many religions coexisted was the dominant way of conceiving of the subcontinent for centuries, until, as Manan Ahmed Asif argues in *The Loss of Hindustan: The Invention of India* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), European colonial historiography collapsed Hindustan into "India," whose only proper religion, according to Europeans, was thought to be Hinduism.

19. "Rūḥ ke parātmā ast nazd-e vīdānteyān be-nesbat-e ān ke bā hame chīz moujūd ast barham mī-gūyand. . . . Ān 'elm, chūn bī-nehāyat va gūnāgūn ast, khod rā dar āyīne-e vahm-hā be-ṣūrat-e jahān va jahāneyān mī-nemāyad . . . Barham . . . kh'āst ke khod rā besyār nemāyad" (Dārā Shikoh, *Jūg Bashist*, 57).

20. "Kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan fa-aḥbābtu an u'raf fa-khalaqtu l-khalqa li-kay u'raf" (Arabic). For a discussion of this *ḥadīth* and its role in Sufi traditions, see, e.g., William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989), 294. On this *ḥadīth* in the context of a different Persian translation of the *Yogavāsistha*, see Shankar Nair, *Translating Wisdom: Hindu-Muslim Interactions in Early Modern South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2020), 151–67.

21. Vasistha says: "If people ask how it is possible that Brahman persists after the destruction of the created world, I reply thus: Brahman endures in the same way that knowledge of something remains after the dissolution of the thing that is known; it is like the pure blankness of a mirror after the departure of reflected forms, like sunlight that still shines after the objects it made visible have disappeared" (Agar gūyand ke māndan-e barham ba'd az fanā-ye shesh jehat va sāyer-e kā'enāt be-che tarīq ast, gūyam chenān mī-mānad ke 'elm ba'd-e fanā-ye ma'lūm va ṣafā-ye āyīne ba'd-e zavāl-e ṣūrat va roushanī-ye āftāb ba'd-e ma'dūm shodan-e

Rama wonders how anyone can make sense of the phenomenal world's bewildering multiplicity. Is it possible to acquire knowledge of reality and win freedom from ignorance? Vasistha replies by offering a remarkable acknowledgment of the many diverse, partial approaches revealed through different traditions. Although none of these traditions, including "the Vedas and Shastras, and all the sects and traditions," reach absolute truth, they nevertheless "bear witness to its existence with loud voices" and "attest to it in a thousand different languages."<sup>22</sup> The importance of engaging with diverse archives of knowledge—through conversation, comparison, translation—is emphasized both in the Indic source text and in Dara Shikoh's recasting of the text in an Islamicate idiom. Vasistha identifies enlightenment and liberation as the goals of inquiry, whose achievement depends upon knowledge acquired through conversation with others: "whoever bathes in the Ganges of good conversation" will find prosperity and joy.<sup>23</sup> As discussed below, the Ganges in Bidel's works also serves simultaneously as a literal and figurative place of gathering, where Indic and Islamic ideas come into contact.

Traherne's use of the concept of world offers a Christian variant on the ideas found in the Hindu and Islamic theological traditions, in which the possibilities of human and divine self-knowledge are fused. He asserts that the world is a representation of God: "this visible World is the Body of GOD, not his Natural Body, but which He hath assumed; let us see how

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ān-che be-nūr-e āftāb dīde shode). Human experience is also cyclical: "The human mind [literally "heart"] . . . is like someone who realizes in a dream that they have been dreaming, and, on waking up, interprets that dream—but the second dream, which was thought to be waking reality, was also but a dream. Although it has no existence, the human mind believes itself to exist . . . without feet, it wanders from world to world in the blink of an eye" (Del . . . meṣl-e kas-ī ke dar kh'āb mī-bīnad ke kh'āb-ī dīde va bīdār shode ta' bīr-e ān kh'āb mī-konad; pas kh'āb-e dovvom ke ān-rā bīdārī mī-dānest ān ham kh'āb būd. Del bā ān-ke vojūd nadārad khod rā moujūd mī-nemāyad . . . pāy nadārad va be-yek negah az 'ālam-ī be 'ālam-ī mī-ravad) (Dārā Shikoh, *Jūg Bashist*, 66).

22. "Bīd va shāstar va hame-ye mazāheb o melal har chand be konh-e zāt-e moqaddas namī-rasand ammā bar hastī-ye ū be-bāng-e boland govāhī mī-dehand va be-hazār zabān be-ḥāqīqat-e ū eqrār o e'terāf dārand" (ibid., 67).

23. "The only way to cross the river of this world is in the ship of conversation with virtuous people (*sādūsangam*: Sanskrit *sādhu* ["virtuous person"] + *sangam* ["assembly; gathering"]). Wherever there is conversation to be found with virtuous people (*ṣoḥbat-e nīk*: Persian *ṣoḥbat* ["conversation"] + *nīk* ["good; virtuous"]), especially with those who know Vedānta, desolate places become populated, poverty turns into wealth, and death is transmuted into joy and celebration. Anyone who bathes in the Ganges of conversation with virtuous people does not need to perform charitable deeds or undertake pilgrimage to holy places" (Az dar-yā-ye 'ālam gozar namī-tavān kard maḡar be-keshtī-ye sādūsangam. Har jā ke ṣoḥbat-e nīk khoṣūṣ dānā-ye vidānt moyassar bāshad, vīrāne ābādānī-st va eflās doulatmandī va marg shādī o jashn. Kas-ī ke dar gange-ṣoḥbat-e nīk ghoṣl karde bāshad ū rā be-khayrāt va zeyārat-e maqāmāte motabarrake ḥājat nīst) (ibid., 53).



Glorious His Wisdom is, in Manifesting Himself therby.”<sup>24</sup> The world is a body God has “assumed” to represent his various attributes, including infinity and eternity, “which we thought impossible to be represented by a Body” (5:57), along with his beauty, goodness, power, life, and so on. Like the Vedantic and Islamic traditions discussed by Dara Shikoh and Bidel, Traherne understands the world as a manifestation of the divine that is made for God’s own self-understanding or enjoyment. The world as it is apprehended by a living being is more valuable than the edifice that is sensed, imagined, or understood, for Traherne’s God made the world to be enjoyed. Each living creature that enjoys the world is the end or telos of all creation, the being for whom the world was created. And God enjoys creation, the body that God has “assumed,” through the enjoyment of that body by all of the enjoyers that God has created.<sup>25</sup>

Traherne and Bidel inherit early modern notions of world as an object created for divine self-knowledge, and both poets develop innovative responses to the human experience of inhabiting a divinely made temporal world that abounds in diversity. In intricate works of prose and verse, Bidel and Traherne articulate remarkable ideas about the fact of multiple languages, literatures, and beliefs that are scattered across the earth; about why this multiplicity exists; about how it ought to be organized; and about the merits—both aesthetic and ethical—that can derive from engagement with diverse archives of knowledge.

## II. WORLDS OF HUMAN IMAGINATION

In *Centuries of Meditation*, Traherne disambiguates the concept of world: “Truly there are two Worlds. One was made by God, the other by Men. That made by GOD, was Great and Beautifull. Before the Fall, It was Adams Joy, and the Temple of his Glory. That made by men is a Babel of Confusions: Invented Riches, Poms and Vanities, brought in by Sin. . . . Leav the one that you may enjoy the other” (5:8–9). The world “made by men” is at odds with the world “made by God,” for the former has revalued everything such that human beings tend to desire what they should not—money, technology, social status—while forgetting what really matters: the softness of air, the intricacy of insect wings, the spark of kindness in a human face. At first, only the God-made world existed. After the Fall,

24. Thomas Traherne, *Centuries of Meditation*, in *The Works of Thomas Traherne*, ed. Jan Ross, 8 vols. (Cambridge: Brewer, 2013–18), 5:57. Subsequent quotations of Traherne are cited parenthetically by volume number and page number (and, in the case of his poetry, by line number[s] as well).

25. For Traherne on enjoyment, see Timothy M. Harrison, *Coming To: Consciousness and Natality in Early Modern England* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 132–40.





see “all,” the speaker’s soul is “endless,” and this feature underpins the “desire” for “many” worlds.

What does this desire mean? The idea of “many” worlds might be understood literally. Writing after Nicholas Cusanus, Giordano Bruno, and other theorists of the infinite, Traherne entertained multiple worlds.<sup>27</sup> “There are Invisible Heavens beyond all the fixed stars which our Eys behold,” Traherne writes in *The Kingdom of God*, “But then at long and Tedious Distances beyond those, there may be (for ought we know) New Heavens, and other August and Magnificent WORLDS, wherin God delighteth as much as in this, tho he seemeth to delight in this alone” (1:392). This view emerges from philosophical reading and scriptural exegesis. “I should not speak of this,” Traherne continues, “did I not Know that the Scriptures Mentions a Pluralitie of them. . . . By faith we understand that *the Worlds* were framed (saith the Apostle) by the word of God” (1:393). Here Traherne glosses Hebrews 11:3 (KJV), where Paul writes: “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.” Paul’s Greek *αἰῶνας*, although rendered as “worlds” in the King James translation, was typically understood to mean “ages,” human historical periods.<sup>28</sup> Traherne veers away from the cultural worlds of human invention. Paul’s God “made *the Worlds*” (1:393).

But if a “Pluralitie” of God-made worlds might exist, what, for Traherne, distinguishes one from another? What is a world such that we could tell when one ends and another begins? This is a difficult question. Contrasting geometrical lines with the created world, Traherne claims:

The Dimensions of the World are unsearchable. An infinit Wall is a poor thing to Express his Infinity. a Narrow Endless Length is Nothing; might be, and if it were, very unprofitable. but the World is round, and endlessly unsearchable evry Way. What Astronomer, what Mathematician, what Philosopher did ever comprehend the Measures of the World? The very Earth alone being round and Globous, is illimited. It hath neither Walls nor Precipices, nor Bounds nor Borders. A man may lose himself in the midst of Nations and Kingdoms. And yet it is but a Centre compared to the Univers. The Distance of the sun, the Altitude of the Stars, the Wideness of the Heavens on evry side passeth the Reach of Sight, and Search of the Understanding. And whether it be infinit or no, we cannot tell. (5:57)

27. See Rosalie L. Colie, “Thomas Traherne and the Infinite: The Ethical Compromise,” *Huntington Library Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (November 1957): 69–82.

28. See Alison Kershaw, “‘Consider It All’: Traherne’s Revealing of the Cosmic Christ in *The Kingdom of God*,” in *Thomas Traherne and Seventeenth-Century Thought*, ed. Elizabeth S. Dodd and Cassandra Gorman (Cambridge: Brewer, 2016), 97, which cites Isaac Barrow as an example of this tendency.

God's infinity is manifest in the created world, which unfolds itself inexhaustibly. The "Earth alone" is "illimited," but is a mere point in a "Univers" that stretches toward the "infinet." *Earth* and *universe* are two words assigned to different portions of the world in which we live. Whereas these terms index immensities that exist in themselves, Traherne uses *world* as relative to those for whom it appears. The God-made world manifests—or, to borrow Bidel's phrase, "discloses a message about"—its creator to the creatures that enjoy the body that this creator has "assumed."

But Traherne pushes past this "single World" so that he may "aspire" to "many" worlds. His phrase might mean that human beings can understand the existence of multiple "August and Magnificent WORLDS," but he also means something more basic. In his view, each living creature—angels, humans, animals, insects—is a minded being capable of enjoying the world as it appears through perception, imagination, and, in some creatures, intellect. Each living creature enjoys its own world, a sphere of phenomenality centered in its own perspective. The intersection of multiple worlds and the first-person perspective was an old problem. In *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds* (1584), Giordano Bruno argues, "If I were on the sun, the moon, or any other star, I should always imagine myself to be at the center of a motionless world around which would seem to revolve the whole surrounding universe, though in truth the containing body on which I found myself would be spinning around its own center."<sup>29</sup> Traherne gives this intersection a transsubjective spin. "The World within you is an offering returned," he claims in *Centuries*, "which is infinitely more Acceptable to GOD Almighty, since it came from him, that it might Return unto Him" (5:86). Since the created world is a structure of illimited phenomenal appearance, each and every living creature enjoys a distinct perspective on this world. As a structure of phenomenal transcendence, "unsearchable evry Way," the world blossoms with multiple worlds—innumerable creaturely spheres of phenomenality, discrete but connected.

Traherne's desire for "many" worlds marks, then, both a desire to think beyond the possible infinity of this world to other God-created worlds and a desire to think one's way into the other worlds inhabited by our fellow creatures, human and nonhuman alike. This practice of imagining spatially distant and phenomenologically adjacent other worlds is a triumph of human existence: "For GOD hath made you able to Creat Worlds in your own mind, which are more Precious unto Him then those which He Created: And to Give and offer up the World unto Him, which is very Delightful in flowing from Him, but more in Returning to Him. Besides all which in its own

29. Giordano Bruno, *On the Infinite Universe and Worlds*, trans. Dorothea Waley Singer, in Dorothea Waley Singer, *Giordano Bruno: His Life and Thought* (New York: Schuman, 1950), 311.

Nature also a Thought of the World, or the World in a Thought is more Excellent than the World, because it is Spiritual and Nearer unto God” (5:86). Human beings are able to “Creat Worlds” within the mind, an act that spiritualizes the world in which we live, thereby transforming it into a gift for God.

The relations between self, world, and self-knowledge set forth in Traherne’s corpus resonate with those in Bidel’s works, where the concept of world involves both phenomenal experience and epistemic endeavor. In his autobiography, *The Four Elements*, Bidel justifies his project by declaring himself a world: “Why dwell on the lives of others? Speak about yourself, Bidel—you’re no less worthy. / A single flower-petal of your self contains a thousand gardens full of color and fragrance; You are a mirror of yourself: you have revealed a world [*‘ālam*].”<sup>30</sup> The self blossoms into an immense surround, revealing a phenomenal world through which self-knowledge becomes possible. In rare moments, this contingency between the phenomenal and epistemic contours of *world* are experienced in transformative ways. Describing a visionary dream in which he briefly acquires total knowledge of the universe, Bidel writes: “I was a world [*‘ālam*]. Like an ocean, I comprised above below before behind.”<sup>31</sup> To be “a world” is to experience oneself as fully integrated with the inexhaustible phenomenality stretching out past every physical boundary into complete—if only momentary—self-knowledge.

Like Traherne, Bidel wrote in religious, intellectual, and literary contexts permeated by a conceptual swirl of worlds. Terms for *world* (such as *‘ālam* and *jahān*) arrived at the threshold of early modernity already equipped with multiple definitions and entangled in diverse systems of knowledge.<sup>32</sup> The opening chapter of the Qur’ān praises God as “lord of the worlds” (*rabb al-‘ālamīn*), and early Arabic commentaries explore several possibilities for what these “worlds” might be. In the eleventh century, al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī defines a world as “that by means of which one knows [something].”<sup>33</sup> Other scholars, such as al-‘Askarī in the ninth century, find etymological links between “world” (*‘ālam*) and “knowledge” (*‘ilm*). In the same century, Ibn Qutayba glosses “worlds” as “categories of spirited beings” (humans, angels, jinn), where each species constitutes its own

30. “Aḥvāl-e dīgarān ze che bar khod fozūde-ī / Bīdel ze khod begū ke to ham kam nabūde-ī // . . . barg-e gol-at hazār chaman ‘arž-e rang o bū-st / āyīne-ye khod-ī o jahān-ī nemūde-ī” (Bidel, verse fragment, lines 1 and 3, in *Kolleyāt*, 4:9).

31. “‘Ālam-ī būdam moḥīt-e taḥt o fouq o pīsh o pas / ghayr-e pā-yam zīr-e pā vo joz sar-am bar sar nabūd” (Bidel, poem, line 9, in *Kolleyāt*, 4:300).

32. For a related account, see Ramachandran, “Worldmaking and Early Modernity,” 126–28.

33. Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī, quoted in Nora S. Eggen, “A Multiverse of Knowledge: The Epistemology and Hermeneutics of the *‘ālam* in Medieval Islamic Thought,” in *Conceptualizing the World: An Exploration across Disciplines*, ed. Helge Jordheim and Erling Sandmo (New York: Bergahn, 2019), 43.

world.<sup>34</sup> Some medieval philosophers writing in the wake of Avicenna's synthesis of Neoplatonism, Aristotelian rationalism, and Islamic theology entertain the idea of a multiverse: in the twelfth century, Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī speculates that God may have created "thousands and thousands" of worlds like this one, each with its own intellects and souls.<sup>35</sup> And al-Ghazālī develops a theory of many worlds that functions as a multipurpose model for ordering discrete epistemic spheres: one *'ālam* describes the phenomenal world available to humans; another is God's invisible province, unknowable to human minds; yet another indicates the specific epistemic authority enjoyed by saints and prophets.<sup>36</sup> Across genres and disciplines, *world* could be an object, an instrument, or an artefact of knowledge—often simultaneously.

In Vedantic, Islamic, and Christian contexts, the world was often understood to be created by God in order actualize divine self-knowledge. Sufi philosophers like Ibn 'Arabī even posit that God needs humans for this endeavor to succeed. The fifteenth-century polymath Jāmī further develops this notion, claiming that the ideal human is able to comprehensively assemble and embody knowledge of this world and of God.<sup>37</sup> This is possible because humans are uniquely capable of accessing an intermediate realm between God and the created world—the world of imagination (*'ālam al-khayāl*). In a lyric poem about Sufis (*darvīsh*, dervishes), Bidel describes their privileged access to another world:

Their presence and concealment  
is not the "near" and "far" that you and we all use:  
"that" and "this" of dervishes is from another world [*'ālam*]  
Living in poverty and independence,  
wielding the authority of those with empty coinpurses,  
dervishes' sleeves are full of *hidden treasure*<sup>38</sup>

This single couplet depicts a dense hierarchy of knowledge spanning multiple worlds. While God creates the world to actualize his own self-knowledge, most humans can never hope to emulate such a world-creative act, nor can they easily acquire knowledge of the world's creator. However, privileged

34. Eggen, "Multiverse of Knowledge," 42.

35. Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, *Al-maṭālib al-'āliya min al-'ilm al-ilāhī*, ed. Aḥmad Hījāzī al-Saqqā, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-kitāb al-'arabī, 1987), 7:384–85. We are grateful to Nora Jacobsen Ben Hammed for this reference.

36. Eggen, "Multiverse of Knowledge," 46. On the significance of al-Ghazālī's theory of imagination for Persian literature, see Domenico Ingenito, *Beholding Beauty: Sa'dī of Shiraz and the Aesthetics of Desire in Medieval Persian Poetry* (Leiden: Brill, 2020).

37. William C. Chittick, "The Perfect Man as the Prototype of the Self in the Sufism of Jāmī," *Studia Islamica* 49 (1979): 135–57.

38. "Ḥozūr o ghaybat-eshān qorb [o] bo'd-e mā vo to nīst / ze 'ālam-e degar ast ān o īn-e darvīshān // be dastgāh-e tohī-kīsegān-e faqr o neyāz / ze kuntu kanz por ast āsetīn-e darvīshān" (Bidel, Ghazal 2490, lines 4–5, in *Kolleyāt*, 1:1164).

persons can access divine truth—these are the Sufi dervishes who carry the *ḥadīth* “I was a hidden treasure” in their sleeves. Internalizing God’s own words, they themselves become “hidden treasures.” The best course of action for those who are less privileged but wish to acquire such knowledge is to model themselves on exemplary persons like the dervishes: while only the spiritual elect can know God so directly, others can gather the harvest of the dervishes’ wisdom.

### III. ASSEMBLAGE ACROSS WORLDS

By juxtaposing the works of Bidel and Traherne and the various intellectual and religious contexts in which they wrote, this essay crafts an assemblage from two mutually illuminating accounts of the concept of world. The term *assemblage* is familiar today as a concept in poststructuralist theory and as a procedure in art and curation where two or more things, each of which was once embedded in a different context, are gathered together to make something new.<sup>39</sup> Practices of assemblage were also common in early modernity.<sup>40</sup> As recent studies in book history, art history, the history of reading, and literary history have demonstrated, assemblage was at the heart of early modern commonplace books, albums, encyclopedias, biographical compendia, and poetic miscellanies.<sup>41</sup> Such genres assembled quotations or images from various traditions, historically distant cultures, and diverse literary works.

Our assemblage of Traherne and Bidel is inspired by early modern albums (*muraqqaʿ*), book-like objects that enact assemblage with stunning aesthetic care. Commissioned by nobles throughout Islamicate territories, *muraqqaʿ*s contain assemblages of paintings, sketches, and calligraphy. In Mughal India, albums were especially cosmopolitan, bringing together specimens from Safavid Iran and northern India alongside drawings from Deccan courts, prints from Europe, and paintings from China.<sup>42</sup> Albums were structured around pairs of facing pages, with pairings often selected

39. See Bill Brown, “Re-Assemblage (Theory, Practice, Mode),” *Critical Inquiry* 46, no. 2 (Winter 2020): 259–303.

40. For assemblage as an early modern phenomenon mirrored by a method for its recovery, see Drew Daniel, *The Melancholy Assemblage: Affect and Epistemology in the English Renaissance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 30–33.

41. For European context, see, e.g., Ann Blair, “Humanist Methods in Natural Philosophy: The Commonplace Book,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 53, no. 4 (October–December 1992): 541–51. For Islamicate context, see, e.g., Elias Muhanna, *The Book in a World: Al-Nuwayri and the Islamic Encyclopedic Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 2018); and Paul Losensky, “Biographical Writing: Tadhkere and Manāqeb,” in *Persian Prose: A History of Persian Literature*, vol. 5, ed. Bo Utas (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming).

42. Yael Rice, “Global Aspirations of the Mughal Album,” in *Rembrandt and the Inspiration of India*, ed. Stephanie Schrader (Los Angeles: Getty Museum, 2018), 61–77.

to elicit surprising juxtapositions: for instance, in the early seventeenth century, Dara Shikoh assembled an album in which depictions of European saints are placed alongside excerpts from Chagatai poetry; on another pair of facing pages, two ascetics—each deep in meditation—appear to be looking at each other.<sup>43</sup>

We argue that Bidel and Traherne, each working with pliant concepts of *world*, deploy assemblage in endeavors that coalesce in different ways around world literature. As we argued in the introduction to this essay, practices of world literature necessarily involve experiments in transregional textual assemblage. In deeply self-reflexive ways, Traherne and Bidel think through the potential of transregional textual assemblage in works that are themselves explicitly structured as assemblages: Traherne in *Commentaries of Heaven*, his sprawling encyclopedia of “All Things” (probably written between 1669 and 1674), and Bidel in *Gnosis* (*ʿErfān*, completed, after many years, in 1712), a long narrative poem in which readers are guided toward self-knowledge through acquaintance with multiple traditions. In these texts, Bidel and Traherne deploy concepts of world in order to theorize and enact world literature by framing the diversity of global traditions as an open framework of discovery available to all.

Bidel experiments with ways of collecting wisdom by crafting assemblages across different traditions: through comparative explorations of what Traherne calls the world “made by men,” Bidel sets Islamic ideas alongside multiple non-Islamic traditions. In *Gnosis*, a poem consisting of more than eleven thousand couplets distributed across ten chapters, Bidel adapts existing models of comparative thinking (such as Dara Shikoh’s alignments of Islam and Hinduism, and assemblages of paintings and calligraphy in *muraqqāʿs*), articulating a vision of world literature. Perhaps modeled on the loose paratactic structure of Rumi’s *Spiritual Verses*, *Gnosis* is atomistic at every level. The poem’s couplets are each syntactically independent, forming larger units of flexibly concatenated narrative segments; and each chapter presents a different eclectic assemblage of knowledge from a global archive. *Gnosis* brings together northern Indian vernacular narratives, Islamic ideas, tales from the *Yogavāsishtha*, pre-Islamic Zoroastrian legends, and Greek philosophy.<sup>44</sup> The open structure of assemblage allows readers to probe the question posed at the poem’s beginning—“What is a human being?”<sup>45</sup>—in an exploratory way.

*Gnosis* proceeds from the idea that wisdom (*ḥekmat*) can be sought by anyone willing to become acquainted with the manifestations of knowledge

43. On the juxtaposition of European saints and Chagatai poetry, see *ibid.*, 64; on the two ascetics in Dara Shikoh’s album, see Gandhi, *Emperor Who Never Was*, 76–77.

44. For Bidel’s version of the Avadhi tale of Madan and Kamdi, see Prashant Keshavmurthy, *Persian Authorship and Canonicity in Late Mughal Delhi: Building an Ark* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 90–126. On Bidel’s reworking of the *Yogavāsishtha*, see Kovacs, “No Journey.”

45. “Chī-st ādam?” (Bidel, *Gnosis*, line 2, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:3).



(*elm*) that are available across geographically and historically dispersed human cultures. Explaining the difference between ideal wisdom and worldly knowledge, Bidel writes: “Knowledge is a reflection, and wisdom—its mirror / Knowledge is dynamic, a movement of flight; wisdom is fixed stability.”<sup>46</sup> Bidel’s readers live in a time when the original “single seed” of wisdom has blossomed into a colorful, diverse “springtime”: there are many paths to enlightenment forged by a variety of traditions.<sup>47</sup> Seeking out diverse forms of knowledge animates the imagination, summons wonder, and enriches the mind; for these reasons, it is incumbent upon those seeking enlightenment to engage with multiple forms of knowledge from across the globe—forms of knowledge that *Gnosis* assembles into an archive of world literature.

One of the poem’s organizing conceits is the idea of circulation through mercantile trade.<sup>48</sup> When Bidel writes that “there is no profession better than trade,”<sup>49</sup> he means this both literally and metaphorically. If acquaintance with the world’s stores of knowledge is a prerequisite for enlightenment and freedom, one must, like a merchant, travel to find new ideas: “If we prepare ourselves, becoming merchants—we shall never be melancholy / We will seize freedom”—and by doing this, “we will make the world [*‘ālam*] shine with splendor.”<sup>50</sup> Bidel develops this idea by recounting a famous episode associated with the Zoroastrian tradition. Seeing that his world was in need of order, the legendary king Jamshid and his advisors undertook to spread systematicity, justice, and technology far and wide. They assembled caravans helmed by traders, each caravan laden with “many worlds of sciences and arts,”<sup>51</sup> and ordered them to scatter throughout the world. This also made it possible for goods from far-flung places—perfumes from Khotan, velvet from Kashan, colorful wool from Europe, leather from Yemen, porcelain from China, glass from Aleppo, gems from Badakhshan, kohl from Esfahan—to circulate, bringing joy.<sup>52</sup> Circulation is essential for the body politic (*mulk*), for whom “the coming and going of merchants is vital, like breath.”<sup>53</sup> As long as merchants travel, ensuring the movement of goods

46. “Elm ‘aks ast o ḥekmat-ash mer’āt / ‘elm parvāz o ḥekmat ast ṣabāt” (ibid., line 6604, in *Kolleyyāt*, 3:244).

47. “Dāne īn-jā bahār mī-gardad / shakhṣ-e vāḥed hazār mī-gardad” (ibid., line 6600, in *Kolleyyāt*, 3:244).

48. This conceit is perhaps informed by personal experience: in his youth, Bidel traveled throughout northern India with his uncle, a trader. See Abdul Ghani, *The Life and Works of Abdul Qadir Bedil* (Lahore: Publishers United, 1960), 24–31.

49. “Pīshe-ī khosh-tar az tejārat nīst” (Bidel, *Gnosis*, line 5011, in *Kolleyyāt*, 3:187).

50. “Be tejārat agar kamar bandīm / bar mezāj-e fesorde dar bandīm // pīsh gīrīm važ-e āzādī . . . / ‘ālam-ī rā dehīm rounaq-e nāz” (ibid., lines 5012, 5013, 5018, in *Kolleyyāt*, 3:187).

51. “Bar gozīdand kārvān-ī chand / har yek az ‘elm o fann jahān-ī chand” (ibid., line 5102, in *Kolleyyāt*, 3:190).

52. Ibid., lines 5111–21, in *Kolleyyāt*, 3:190–91.

53. “Āmad o raft-e tājer-ash nafas ast” (ibid., line 5129, in *Kolleyyāt*, 3:191).

and ideas, “this garden will be safeguarded from autumn.”<sup>54</sup> Merchants are “aware of the *many knowledges* on offer” and “are acquainted with a thousand languages”; through their efforts, West and East become connected, and “India holds a rosary of Arabian sand.”<sup>55</sup>

Bidel expands this arrestingly tactile image of India’s contact with Arabia through an evocative assemblage across worlds that juxtaposes Indic and Islamic ideas. The poem describes how yogis, sanyasis (renunciates), vairāgikas (ascetics), Brahmins, and representatives of other sects have assembled to converse on the banks of the Ganges, each group striving to understand the “melody of secrets.”<sup>56</sup> Suddenly, a new sound is heard “from Sri Lanka to Multan”: “*labbayk*,” an Arabic exclamation (“I am at your service!”) spoken by Muslims to God.<sup>57</sup> A conversation subsequently unfolds between the Indic sects and the Muslims, who have just arrived in the subcontinent, and the poem is at pains to show how this influx of knowledge is salutary, causing “old melancholy” to acquire “hues of newness.”<sup>58</sup>

Their conversation revolves around a long-standing question: How does the Ganges flow from heaven to earth? Several stories from the Abrahamic traditions are recounted: of the Jews wandering in the desert; of the flood during Noah’s times; of how a divine power—often referred to as the abstract quality of “mercy” or “god” in confession-neutral terms<sup>59</sup>—took pity on creation and turned a mountain into flowing water. This water of “divine generosity” came to be known in the subcontinent as “the Ganges” and in the Islamic West as “the Sayḥūn.”<sup>60</sup> With the passage of time, this first “pure” river “became divided: it swiftly flowed left and right,” branching into many different rivers—which became known as “the Nile, the Euphrates, the Jayḥūn.”<sup>61</sup> This same river also “flowed east, unbroken” as the Ganges in India—and “it will keep flowing in this form, for eternity, as a messenger of

54. “K-īn chaman īmen az khazān bāshad” (ibid., line 5130, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:191).

55. “Chūn sokhan maḥram-e hazār zabān”; “īn ‘olūm-āgahān-e maktab-e dīd”; “hend az īn qoum-e āgahī koukab / sobḥe-gardān-e rīg-e ‘arab” (ibid., lines 5145, 5151, 5149, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:191–92).

56. “Kī-st fahmad tarāne-ye asrār” (ibid., line 5179, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:193).

57. “Az sarāndīb tā ḥadd-e moltān / shūr-e labbayk del gosaste ‘enān” (ibid., line 5181, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:194).

58. “Az samā ‘e kalām-e mortazāvī / ḥasrat-e kohne yāft rang-e navī” (ibid., line 5216, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:193).

59. For instance, *ḥaqq* (“that which is most real,” the same term for “God” used in Dara Shikoh’s Persian translation of the *Yogavāsīṣṭa*), and *yazdān* (“God” in the Zoroastrian tradition).

60. “Mouj-e baḥr . . . gasht mousūm nazd-e ahl-e fonūn / hendavī gang o maghrebī sayḥūn” (Bidel, *Gnosis*, lines 5903–4, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:219).

61. “Chūn zolāl-ash be enqesām rasīd / be chap o rāst monkader gardīd // monsha‘eb yāft ‘aql qānūn-ash / kh‘ānd nīl o forāt o jayḥūn-ash” (ibid., lines 5905–6, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:219).

mercy, letter in hand,” issuing “a general invitation to the whole world.”<sup>62</sup> Upon recognizing this remarkable confluence across traditions (the Abrahamic narratives of the waters of paradise flowing earthward, and the accounts of the Ganges flowing from heaven to earth in Indic traditions), the people gathered at the banks of the Ganges “found consolation.”<sup>63</sup> Although it might be tempting to read these concatenated anecdotes as tending ineluctably toward a triumphal confirmation of the superiority of Islam, Bidel’s preference for ambiguity over tidy resolution—for assemblage over teleology and genealogy—works against such unilateral interpretations. *Gnosis* is an intricate, compendious work that insists on spending time in diverse thought worlds, allowing the reader to inhabit and juxtapose them in a variety of ways. One river springs from a single divine source, the poem argues; accidents of human convention, language, and geography rechannel the flow of truth, which comes to be known differently in different places and times. The poem’s practice of assemblage defers final, settled interpretations, perhaps indefinitely, dwelling instead on the resonant possibilities of acquaintance with diverse forms of knowledge that are available throughout the world.

This positive valuation of differences that emerge among and between the various worlds “made by men” is shared by Traherne, who, despite his negative framing of human custom, also elevates historically contingent practices. Once we have adjusted our perspectives and learned to “Enjoy the World aright” (5:19), we can begin to see human worlds as more than a distortion warping the created world. Understood correctly, these are a source not of misplaced values but of variety. This is an argument that Traherne makes in *Commentaries of Heaven*. Sprawling across almost two hundred densely packed folio manuscript pages and nearly one thousand printed pages, this text assembles around one hundred alphabetically arranged entries on a variety of topics, beginning with “Abhorrence” and ending, well short of totality, with “Bastard.” Nestled alongside one another, the entries slip from physical things (“Atom”), to abstractions (“Attonement,” “Attainment,” “Attendance”), to mental capacities (“Attention”), the aspiration to completeness generating a logic of assemblage.

The *Commentaries* includes learning from a wide array of disciplines and cultures. In an entry on “Aristotle,” Traherne weighs the evidence concerning the philosopher’s acquaintance with Hebrew thought (3:195–96) and traces the spread of his ideas from such Greek successors as Theophrastus and Strato (3:192–94) to the “Arabian Commentators, Averroes, Avicenna,

62. “Īn ke bī-sho’be tā be mashreq tākht / dar sar-e hend shūr-e gang andākht // mī-ravad tā abad be ĩn šūrat / nāme dar dast qāṣed-e raḥmat . . . // az dar-e jūd shod be ĩn ekrām / bar jahān da’vat-e tarāḥom-e ‘āmm” (ibid., lines 5907–8, 5913, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:219).

63. “Jostojū šūrat-e tasallī bast” (ibid., line 5919, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:219).

etc.” (3:194), noting that although Averroes, a “famous physician” who “flourished in Spain,” was “no Friend to the Christians, yet have the Scholemen made his Comments on Aristotle the Foundation of all their Schole Divinitie” (3:195). Traherne theorizes the connections between the diversity of human traditions—distinct but connected—in an entry on “Babel”:

When we enter upon the yeers of Discretion, we find our selvs Babes still to the Forrein Nations and Kingdoms on Earth: for by reason of the variety of Languages, we are dumb (as it were) to all men but those of our own Country, and unable to understand them: their Speech being so forrein and obscure to our own, that there is a necessity of Labor at schole, in Learning Latine Greeke and Hebrew, before we can be men of Eminent Knowledg. for either we our selvs, or some other for us must be able to interpret Languages, before we can know the Wisdom and the Beauty of other Nations. Yet this at last turneth into a vaste Advantage. (3:440)

The historical event of Babel explains how human beings became “Divid[ed] in their Tongues” (3:440). Babel is the reason we must encounter and learn languages other than “our own.” But we do so not to apprehend the superiority of our customs in relation to those who live in the “Forrein Nations and Kingdoms on Earth,” but rather in order to “know the Wisdom and the Beauty of other Nations” (3:440). When approached correctly, the worlds “made by men” are in fact good, for the “Variety of Languages is a Marvelous Ornament and Beauty to the World” (3:441). Human concepts and words divide up and reorder the created world, but they also amplify and variegate its surfaces. Learning to craft an assemblage of languages and traditions from various times and places is hard work, but it enables Traherne to envision something akin to the picture of world literature that Bidel assembles in *Gnosis*.

Auerbach argues that “*Weltliteratur* does not merely refer to what is generically common and human; rather it considers humanity to be the product of fruitful intercourse between its members. The presupposition of *Weltliteratur* is a *felix culpa*: mankind’s division into many cultures.”<sup>64</sup> Although Traherne does not exactly possess Auerbach’s concept of world literature, he sees the issues in the same way. Babel was a *felix culpa*, a fortunate fall. But whereas the original Fall is, in Traherne’s eyes, reversable in some respects, the event of Babel is not. We live among the multiplicity of human tongues, and the fact of Traherne’s own existence is dependent on Babel: “We, / For ought we know, to this Calamitie / Our Beings owe. It changd the course of Times, / And marriages: we sprang up from their Crimes: / And had it not for this Confusion been, / The Beauty of the World had never seen”

64. Erich Auerbach, “Philology and *Weltliteratur*,” trans. Maire Said and Edward Said, *Centennial Review* 13, no. 1 (Winter 1969): 2.

(3:442, lines 111–16). If not for Babel, Traherne could never have discovered the “Beauty of the World,” in both its created and its human iterations. Without Babel Traherne could not have “made this song” (3:443, line 122). But it is not just the multiplicity of human languages that arose from Babel. We also owe our deepest concepts to this event: “I all the World, and Heaven, for ought I know, / My self, yea and my GOD to Babel owe! / Or if that seem too deep: I plainly see, / I owe it Worlds of Sweet Varietie” (3:433, lines 127–30). Since the God-made world is an illimited expanse, an undivided whole, it is the world “made by men” that provides the tools for (mis)understanding the created world. Without Babel, Traherne could not think of the world or heaven or himself or God. Since his apprehension of any world is structured by his understanding and since his understanding is predicated on historically contingent ways of knowing, the world must always be multiple, and in multiple ways: both insofar as it always shows up to a given individual creature and insofar as it shows up in historically, culturally, and linguistically determined ways. This is why he owes to Babel “Worlds of Sweet Varietie.”

Whereas Bidel grounds his assemblage in a center of gravity that makes the banks of the Ganges its symbolic home, Traherne crafts his assemblage from rural England looking east toward the European continent and beyond. Without Babel, he claims, “There had no English been, / No French, no Spaniards, no contest between / The Dutch and France: Hebrew had been the Tongue / Of all the World” (3:442–43, lines 119–22). Traherne’s assemblage of “Worlds of Sweet Varietie” is distinctly European, but nevertheless reaches out to the various languages and traditions (Hebrew and Arabic, among others) that generate human wisdom and beauty.

In *Gnosis*, Bidel goes a step further, demonstrating that acquaintance with multiple traditions is vital for individual and collective felicity: “If the aim is to experience certain knowledge, one must not neglect others’ journeys.”<sup>65</sup> Interestingly, the mere fact of travel is not enough for enlightenment. Bidel illustrates this point through two figures well known to Traherne, using Alexander the Great as a negative example: while conquering the world, he “amassed treasuries of gold and jewels” but neglected to acquire wisdom, and found himself lacking in the true “capital of existence.”<sup>66</sup> Haunted by fear of death, Alexander undertakes an unsuccessful quest for the water of life, which supposedly grants immortality. Aristotle redirects Alexander onto a better path, counseling him to “seek glory” by “conquering the

65. “Gar shohūd-e yaqīn bovad maqṣūd / ghāfel az sayr-eshān nabāyad būd” (Bidel, *Gnosis*, line 5970, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:221).

66. “Ganj-hā az zar o gohar ambāshht . . . z-ān hame jens k-az ghorūr afzūd / ān-che kam yāft naqd-e hastī būd” (ibid., lines 6308, 6310, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:233–34).

eternal clime.”<sup>67</sup> Aristotle urges Alexander to “abandon willfulness” and “spread justice” throughout the world.<sup>68</sup> According to Bidel, Aristotle’s advice “brought renewal to the old world” and “made the world a place of springtime” once more.<sup>69</sup> Bidel closes this episode by juxtaposing the value of Aristotle’s ideas with the earlier example of confluences between Abrahamic and Indic traditions: like “the merchants who reached India, . . . studied the books of the ancients” and found freedom, learning “the truth of the Ganges,” “everyone who lights their candle from [Aristotle’s] flame of knowledge / will never be scarred by death.”<sup>70</sup> From conversations among different Indic sects, to the edifying exchanges between “Arabian” and “Indian” traditions, to the suggestive parallels drawn between Zoroastrian, Greek, and Islamic ideas—Bidel’s poem brims with assemblages across worlds. Drawing on multiple examples culled from a diverse archive of knowledge, Bidel insists on the importance of exposure to ideas from around the globe. In doing so, he advances a distinct vision of world literature, which, for him, is both a repository of knowledge and an open hermeneutic framework that promotes individual self-knowledge, collective enlightenment, and global flourishing.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Our reconstruction of two early modern approaches to *world* and *world literature* invites reflection on these concepts’ modern iterations. Bidel and Traherne remind us that world literature—both then and now—is an experimental assemblage that is entangled with various endeavors in adjacent disciplines, including philosophy, religion, and history, among others. They also remind us that projects of world literature always involve tendentious temporalities and geographies. Traherne and Bidel adopt creative attitudes to the organization and significance of diversity of thought across time and space, languages and traditions. At the same time, our essay throws into stark relief how concepts of world literature tend to form around particular centers of gravity: Bidel convenes a multiconfessional congress of ideas on the banks of a Ganges under Muslim Mughal rule, and Traherne transposes Babel onto a Protestant England of his own time. Above all, as our

67. “Shāh tā shoukat-ash tavān gīrad / bāyad eqlīm-e jāvedān gīrad” (ibid., line 6323, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:234).

68. “Tark-e ashghāl-e khod-sarī gīrīd / molk-e akhlāq-gostarī gīrīd” (ibid., line 6430, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:238).

69. “Hāṣel ol-amr ān ḥakīm-e zaman / tāzegī bast bar jahān-e kohan // . . . z-īn ṣefat rang-hā be jūsh āvard / ālam-ī ra bahār-pūsh āvard” (ibid., lines 6558, 6560, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:242).

70. “Har ke sham ‘ash ze ‘elm dar-gīrad / tā abad dāgh-e marg nap(a)zīrad // . . . v-az hamān ‘elm dar nehāyat-e kār / bāz shod ‘oqde-hā-ye ān tojjār // k-az ketāb-e salaf be īn farhang / gasht ma’lūm-eshān ḥaqīqat-e gang” (ibid., lines 6579, 6582–83, in *Kolleyāt*, 3:243).

juxtaposition of Traherne and Bidel suggests, early modern practices of world literature are creative assemblages that are entwined with projects of self-knowledge.

In early modern albums, assemblage is a method-neutral activity—perhaps even an anti-method—that does not impose hermeneutic principles. Albums solicit creative engagement with diverse materials, encouraging “readers” to attend to similarities and differences in style, medium, and content. This activity has both ethical and aesthetic dimensions. One seventeenth-century Mughal album preface notes that while “truth” resides in scripture, this knowledge becomes accessible and useful when it becomes “threaded together into writing” or “bound into paintings.”<sup>71</sup> Assemblage here is an open framework in which readers experience, recontextualize, and experiment with many worlds: God’s divine realm, the created phenomenal world, manmade worlds, worlds of imagination.<sup>72</sup> In the spirit of the assemblage practices on paradigmatic display in early modern albums, our essay has brought together for the first time two sets of experiments with the concepts of world and world literature, each undertaken in distant earthly locations. These concepts are, as our assemblage suggests, like stem cells, shaped by the demands and structures of local context. Assemblage allows us to explore the worlds of early modern world literature in an immanent way. By attempting to answer the question, “What was early modern world literature?” simultaneously from two perspectives, we have tried to refuse any latent set of organizing principles through which languages and ideas from one part of the earth are used to make sense of the rest.<sup>73</sup> Whatever whole might be said to emerge through our handling of Traherne and Bidel, we have endeavored not to impose it from above, but rather to have coaxed it into being through an equipollent analysis of two historically situated poetic representations of worlds and textual archives.

It is worth saying that our assemblage across the worlds of Traherne and Bidel is not a radically new mode of scholarship. Scholars of early modernity have long curated assemblages: one work might assemble Montaigne, Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Descartes in order to examine early modern understandings of the self, while others curate different assemblages for different purposes. By naming this everyday scholarly practice *assemblage*, we want to emphasize the contingency of the limits that are usually placed

71. “Ammā ḥaqīqat-e ma’refat az kalām-e mo’jez-nezām-e elāhī va ḥadīḡ-e ṣaḥīḥ-e moṣṭafavī mostafād mī-gardad va ān tā dar selk-e taḥrīr va qayd-e taṣvīr dar nayāyad be-sohūlat az ān mostafād namī-tavān shod” (quoted in Wheeler M. Thackston, *Album Prefaces and Other Documents on the History of Calligraphers and Painters* [Leiden: Brill, 2001], 40).

72. David J. Roxburgh, *The Persian Album, 1400–1600: From Dispersal to Collection* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), 34–35.

73. On this issue, see Edgar Garcia, *Signs of the Americas: A Poetics of Pictography, Hieroglyphs, and Khipu* (University of Chicago Press, 2020).



upon it. If scholarship often proceeds by way of tacit assemblage, bringing together parts once located elsewhere, why do scholars so often confine their work to points of origin conventionally understood as belonging to geographically or culturally contiguous areas?

We believe that the approach we are calling *assemblage across worlds* offers salutary correctives for the study and practice of world literature in the twenty-first century. First, we argue that world literature as a concept and a practice of organizing knowledge should be more fully historicized. Accepting the nineteenth-century European claims of *Weltliteratur* elides the fact that there have been many iterations of world literature in past eras and other traditions. And these iterations are not only recoverable, but also valuable and vital. A second benefit of assemblage is that it encourages collaboration and fosters conversations across disciplinary boundaries. Scholars can, and should, work together: since no one individual can acquire deep expertise in all, or even multiple, geographically distant traditions, coming together through collaboration can spur an expansion of inquiry beyond the confines of specialization. Third, assemblages across worlds allow for forms of engagement with diverse constellations of texts, which, when examined in contextualized detail, can make conventionally unconnected traditions speak to each other in exciting new ways.

In this essay, we have attempted to demonstrate that a critical practice of exploring early modern archives collaboratively, through multiple points of entry, can empower a scholarship that is more inclusive in its objects and more expansive in its horizons. In her study of epistemic injustice, Miranda Fricker identifies what she calls “hermeneutical injustice,” which occurs when there is “a gap in collective understanding—a hermeneutical lacuna whose existence is owing to the relative powerlessness” of certain groups. Hermeneutical injustice causes our “collective interpretive resources” to become or remain “structurally prejudiced.”<sup>74</sup> We believe that assemblage can help work against the lingering hermeneutical injustice that partially obstructs the study of world literature today. Curating assemblages across worlds is both an intellectual and an ethical endeavor that promotes what Fricker, echoing Bidel and Traherne, calls a richer, unimpeded flow of knowledge. To this modern formulation we might add the early modern hope for world literature—namely, that exposure to diverse transregional textual assemblages can translate into wisdom and enlightenment, perhaps even freedom and felicity.

74. Miranda Fricker, “Précis,” in “Forum on Miranda Fricker’s *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*,” *Theoria: Revista de Teoría, Historia y Fundamentos de la Ciencia* 23, no. 1 (2008): 69, <https://www.redalyc.org/comocitar.oa?id=339730805007>. On the related idea of cognitive injustice, see Shiv Visvanathan, *A Carnival for Science: Essays on Science, Technology, and Development* (Oxford University Press, 1997).