In *Poetry in a Global Age*, Jahan Ramazani brings together two seemingly opposite approaches—the close and textual attention that often comes with the study of small-scale works of poetry with the broader and more distant examination of cross-national and cross-cultural movements that typically governs the study of globalization. As Ramazani notes, “originating largely in the social sciences, global studies can’t be smoothly assimilated to the qualitative reflections of the humanities” (177). Yet even as he recognizes the challenges that go along with an interdisciplinary approach like his, Ramazani nevertheless insists that a careful method can “enhance[]…attention to the poetry as poetry” (177, italics mine). Moreover, according to Ramazani, the humanities’ approach to global studies has typically focused on the novel and other narrative forms, overlooking the relevance of poetry in the positioning and understanding of globalization. Intentionally eschewing this divide between poetry and globality as well as between close reading and distant reading, Ramazani turns to a range of twentieth-century modernist and postcolonial poets across national boundaries precisely to consider what these poets have to say on the topic of globality in, and through, their poems. As he argues, modernist and postcolonial writers are “deeply intertwined” and both “work from the shared historical ground of a worldwide modernity” (101).
Ramazani is guided predominantly by a series of questions at the start of each chapter of *Poetry in a Global Age*, as he attempts to develop connections between poetry and globality while still attending to careful textual approaches to poetry. The book is divided into ten multifaceted chapters. Several chapters are dedicated to studies of three twentieth-century modernist poets: W.B. Yeats, Wallace Stevens, and Seamus Heaney. Other chapters make a broader examination of a larger group of poets, including Agha Shahid Ali, W.H. Auden, Elizabeth Bishop, Mary Borden, Kamau Brathwaite, Cathy Park Hong, Wilfred Owen, and Ezra Pound. He turns to these poets as their own kind of authorities, suggesting that in their poems they speak to different ways of understanding globality that have not been raised by literary critics who have focused on narrative genres such as the novel in their approach to global studies. Discussing Franco Moretti and his “distant reading,” which has popularized a way to map and compute broader trajectories of world literature, Ramazani argues that Moretti’s paradigm is difficult to square with poetry’s formal demands (124). As Ramazani observes, “poetry has been associated more than any other genre with close reading partly because of the small-scale intricacies and textures that help constitute poems and that risk disappearing when works are viewed at a remove” (124). For Ramazani, a close approach remains essential if we are to study and understand poetry, given that “[h]ow a poem says what it says is no less essential to its identity as a poem than what it says” (124). Or, as he metaphorically puts it when speaking of the content and form in Heaney’s poem, “Alphabets,” “the poem is both about the globe and itself a globe” (181).

Throughout his analysis of modernist and postcolonial poetry, Ramazani is invested in highlighting both big and small ways that twentieth-century poets, who one may initially conceive as national poets, have been imbricated in cross-national and cross-cultural literary production. Indeed, Ramazani insists that these poets have also used poetry to challenge nationalism explicitly.
As an example, Ramazani discusses how Isaac Rosenberg’s “Break of Day in the Trenches” uses the figure of a roaming rat to directly mention “‘cosmopolitan sympathies’” and to question nationalism in the context of World War I (27-28). Ramazani says that poets like Rosenberg have used poetry to participate in “literary spaces for enacting, and reflecting on, transnational imaginative solidarities” (28).

One can further see the stakes of Ramazani’s investment in collapsing nation-based approaches to the study of poetry, in probing the viability of national identity, and in advancing transnational connections in his chapter, “Yeats’s Asias: Modernism, Orientalism, Anti-orientalism.” Here Ramazani delves into Yeats’s engagement with Asia in the continental sense—rather than in the national sense, such as the studies discussing Japan and India that, he points out, figure in the existing scholarship on Yeats—to show both orientalism and anti-orientalism in Yeats’s poems (133). In exploring Yeats’s “multifaceted interest in East, South, and West Asian cultures,” Ramazani exemplifies how the foundationally modernist poet Yeats had drawn on a broad range of creative and intellectual influences and interests that were not limited to Europe alone, but that were, in fact, strongly interconnected with Asia (133). Thus, Ramazani attempts to reconfigure a Eurocentric and nationalist understanding of Yeats’s modernism, saying, for example, that it is “Yeats’s encounter with Asia, long before he became a deep reader of Nietzsche, that helps instill his perspectivism” (147).

Ramazani also engages in innovative ways with poetry’s relationship to the plurality of languages and cultures “especially in the wake of the intensified globalization of the past century or so”—that is, in a world wherein these languages are seen to increasingly and more frequently cross and intersect with one another (193). The final chapters deal with the presence of “code-switching” between languages as well as the debate surrounding whether language is translatable
or untranslatable; here again, Ramazani is interested in what poets have had to say on these intensified intersections of language in their own poems. For Ramazani, poetry’s intimate connection with language makes it vital for such debates: “alert to the origins of words and the routes they’ve travelled, poets often make visible the permeability of languages” (194). In Ramazani’s analysis, a study of these poets’ language—such as the example he provides of Ezra Pound incorporating several languages within one of his poems—once again highlights the limitations of containing and defining their works on a national basis (200). In discussing examples from contemporary poetry like Hong’s Dance Dance Revolution, Ramazani discusses how she mixes several languages together, manifesting, however, the playfulness, and not the collapse, of language: “[A]ll these poets [like Hong] revel in the linguistic vitality made available by intercultural contact” (202). This material on “code-switching” and the translatability of language raises particularly fascinating insights into how poets participate in globality at the level of language, or literally through their own words.

Poetry in a Global Age can be situated at the crossroads of poetry studies, globalization studies, modernist studies, and postcolonial studies. Professor of English at the University of Virginia, two of Ramazani’s other recent works—A Transnational Poetics (2009) and Poetry and Its Others: News, Prayer, Song, and the Dialogue of Genres (2013)—reveal his long-standing interests in the way in which poetry moves across dimensions of space, time, and genre. In particular, the emphasis on thinking about twentieth-century poetry across national, cultural and hemispheric borders in his A Transnational Poetics speaks most directly to the project of his newest book, Poetry in a Global Age. As he puts it, “but whereas singular modernity and diffusionism stress standardization and homogenization in history and culture, pluralist concepts
help to bring out heterogenization” (111). His largely pluralistic critical approach also takes after his conceptualization of poetry:

As we turn a poem over and over, it is likely to reveal a kaleidoscopic range of local-foreign configurations, no matter how firmly situated within the local or how foreign its form or content may at first appear. […] Instead of abstracting world literary evolution as a one-dimensional and one-directional model or scientific law, our form-content analysis should—taking its cues from poems—aspire to be polyphonic and multilayered, moving nimbly back and forth between micro and macro, local and global. (130-131)

Ramazani’s study creates a rich tapestry of many different poets and critics conversing with globalization, even as he almost always defers to the poets and to poems for their insights on globality and globalizing processes.

In the end, Poetry in a Global Age invites readers to continue exploring, in the manner of Ramazani’s own open-ended inquiry, connections between the domains of poetry and globality. But the deeper stake of what is undoubtedly a vital project for our contemporary globalized situation remains somewhat indistinct within such a pluralistic approach that welcomes and invites yet more pluralism. Ramazani’s style, as well as his hope, appears to rest with the openness and connection-making of poetry more than with certainty or definability. While such a style undoubtedly has its own value as a counterforce to divisiveness, it also has its own limitations. When reading the book with scholarly or personal interest, one may find oneself wishing not necessarily for a certain, or a final, critical answer from the author but at least for a greater sense of the critical significance of these poets’ works at the level of the political or of the historical. While Ramazani brings considerations of postcolonialism into conversation with his analysis of
modernist and postcolonial poetry, his pluralist approach nevertheless distances him from the political and power-based critique that often, but not always, features in postcolonial criticism.

An invitation to pluralism, on its own, does not sufficiently address social dynamics of power, such as imperialism, class, gender, or sexuality. For example, how might the examples of working-class or queer poets be relevant for thinking about cross-national solidarities? Or how might poets with historically marginalized identities, such as those of class or sexuality, use “code-switching” in a way that subverts the meaning of words in order to reclaim them for their own political purposes? Put in other words, understanding and appreciating the pluralism of perspectives of poets on an interconnected globality does not necessarily provide adequate consideration to the multiple identities, groups, and nations that may not merely be in play in global modernity, but that may indeed be in a conflictual and power-based relationship with one another. Delving into this book’s rich examples and readings of poetry, one may find oneself searching for an engagement with sociopolitical dynamics of such a nature.

Ramazani’s conception of poetry’s multiplicity points to the need to consider such questions and dynamics. According to Ramazani, poetry is vital for thinking about globality precisely for the way in which poetry’s complexity and connection-building open up to the multiplicity of considering others’ viewpoints. As he writes, citing Richard Rorty’s take on the novel and applying it to poetry, “poetry’s facility at double- and even multisided thinking makes it suited to the ‘imaginative ability to see strange people as fellow sufferers’ (Rorty)” (35). While Ramazani sees poetry as vital for “‘see[ing] strange people as fellow sufferers,’” he does not sufficiently consider the role of power in determining who suffers most. Understandably so, the ideal audience for *Poetry in a Global Age* may very well be scholars and readers whose concern and interests are primarily in the poetry, rather than in the history or politics, of modernist and postcolonial
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literature. Surely all scholars and readers will find in Ramazani’s expansive and thoughtful exploration of both canonically and marginally studied poets a deeper understanding of the significant position that poetry holds for thinking about global modernity.

AMIR HUSSAIN is a graduate from the PhD program in Comparative Literature at Emory University, USA. His primary interests are in comparative and transnational approaches to the study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century poetry, Oscar Wilde studies, as well as questions of historicity and poetry’s translatability. During his doctoral years, he pursued supported training in Germany through the DAAD and the Free University of Berlin. In addition, he has published poems in multiple literary journals.