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Autor: Beecroft, Alexander

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Alexander Beecroft

Negotiating the Glocal in the Post-Global: What's Next for World Literature?

La plupart des théories de la littérature mondiale ont émergé pendant les années de l'ascension de la mondialisation néolibérale et supposent que cette ascension se poursuivra. En conséquence, l'avenir du roman mondial suscite une grande inquiétude, compte tenu de l'hégémonie de l'anglais et de la mondialisation d'un modèle culturel particulier. Des événements plus récents, que ce soit le Brexit et l'élection de Donald Trump ou la pandémie de COVID-19, remettent en cause l'inéluctabilité de la mondialisation de diverses manières, même s'ils laissent présager des avenir encore plus inquiétants. Cependant, ces défis propres à la mondialisation peuvent présenter de nouvelles opportunités pour le roman mondial : des opportunités de raconter des crises globales dans des contextes glocalaux.

Many of the foundational theoretical works in the recent iteration of 'world literature' date to the turn of the millennium, a moment which in retrospect marked a relative ascendancy of the economic and political discourses of globalization. Each of these foundational works: the inevitable trinity of Pascale Casanova's *La république mondiale des lettres*¹; Franco Moretti's influential *New Left Review* articles beginning with "Conjectures on World Literature"²; and David Damrosch's *What is World Literature?*³; was composed during the years between the formation of the World Trade Organization in 1995 after the completion of the Uruguay Round of negotiations in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and the financial crisis of 2008.

These years were years in which the ideology of global trade liberalization reigned supreme in most of the world's capitals, championed by governments in the US and UK belonging to parties formerly known for their skepticism on trade, and anchored by the so-called Davos consensus on economic and fiscal policy. The beginning of this era saw a historically weak political left, its confidence challenged by the collapse of Soviet domination of Eastern Europe in 1989 and then of the Soviet Union itself in 1991, and while globalization did begin to generate an organic resistance in the developed world (notably with the anti-WTO protests in Seattle in 1999) it would take the

1 Pascale Casanova. *La République Mondiale Des Lettres*. Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999.

2 Franco Moretti. "Conjectures on World Literature". *New Left Review* 1 (2000): p. 54-68.

3 David Damrosch. *What Is World Literature?* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

2008 crisis to bring left-wing anti-globalization views to the forefront of political debate, especially in the Anglophone liberal democracies. The left in the Global South of course continued its powerful and cogent critiques of neoliberalism and globalization, as with the widespread election of left-leaning governments in Latin America around and after the turn of the millennium, but the attack on globalization which received the most attention in the North was rather that of Islamist terrorism, especially with the events of September 11, 2001. The US-led invasions of Afghanistan later that year, and of Iraq in 2003 ensured that the radical-Islamist perspective would remain highly visible throughout this period.

Our leading theories of world literature, then, emerged in an era when neoliberal globalization was in the ascendant, and when political opposition to globalization was either scattered and ineffectual, or wholly unusable. In both cases, the critique served to reinforce the aura of inevitability about the project of globalization, and arguably our theories of world literature show the impact of that inevitability. Casanova's market of literary values is as merciless as the stock exchange, its invisible hand ascribing literary recognition to a favored few. Moretti's model for the diffusion of the Anglo-French novelistic form, more wave than tree, scours the land of previously-existing narrative forms. The gains accrued in translation in Damrosch's world literature seem to concentrate the wealth of literary recognition on a selection of hypercanonical works, however eloquently Damrosch may argue for the importance of broadening the canon. For that matter, my own "World Literature without a Hyphen"⁴, which appeared as the 2008 crisis was unfolding but was written several months earlier, expresses ambivalence about the notion of a global literature, but grounds that ambivalence in an understanding of past formations rather than in specific hopes for a different future.

More recent events have challenged the dominance of neoliberal globalism much more forcefully, though in many cases by replacing it with something more problematic still. Most particularly, the years since 2016 have seen Brexit and the presidency of Donald Trump, not to mention the rise of equivalent right-wing political movements in other countries, from Brazil to Turkey to Hungary to India, and the increasingly hardline regime in China. Popular anti-globalism has all too often taken on a xenophobic tone, more interested in performing outrage against the vulnerable than in substantive and ameliorative policy change. Most strikingly, this shift to the populist alt-right has been especially pronounced in those nations which historically have profited most from colonialism and later from globalization, notably the United States, the United Kingdom and France. In a manner which would have seemed startling ten years ago, the financial interests

⁴ Alexander Beecroft. "World Literature Without a Hyphen: Towards a Typology of Literary Systems". *New Left Review* 54 (2008): p. 87-100.

sympathetic to the center-right in those countries have embraced movements deeply hostile to trade liberalization, so long as they remain conservative on taxation and redistribution policy. The Davos consensus is unravelling, as much because the wealthy are allowing it to do so as because the people are demanding it.

None of this has yet quite been taken into account in theories of world literature. Critics have frequently accused world literature of being too complacent about globalization, and have sought to imagine alternative, more critical, theories, but there has still been relatively little attention paid to the question of what role the concept of world literature might play in a world where the inevitability of globalization can no longer be assumed. The election of Joe Biden as US President in November 2020 may represent something of a reversion to the historical norm, but it is certainly far from clear that this is sufficient to return the move to globalization to its previous trajectory and pace.

In part, I would suggest, world literature theory has failed to adapt to these changes because globalization itself has always been something that literature, and therefore literary theory, have had trouble discussing. As I've suggested above, theories of world literature have either seemed complacent or mournful about the triumph of globalization, but either way have had little doubt about the inevitability of that triumph. But the novel (the literary form which in the twenty-first century has dominated discussions of newly-produced 'world literature') has also struggled to work out how to represent globalization, in spite of the use of techniques such as the ones I have elsewhere called "the plot of globalization"⁵ and "the refusal of translation".⁶ Similarly, as Amitav Ghosh among others has claimed, the novel has struggled to depict climate change as a global phenomenon. In *The Great Derangement*, Ghosh argued that the realist novel's limited capacity to recount improbable events explained much of the failure of literary fiction to address climate change.⁷ Ursula Heise has argued that the environmental movement's celebration of the local has inadvertently obscured the global impact of environmental issues.⁸

This troubled relationship between the local and the global in narrative may seem surprising. After all, the great nineteenth-century realist novels,

5 Alexander Beecroft. "On the Tropes of Literary Ecology: The Plot of Globalization". *Globalizing Literary Genres: Literature, History, Modernity*. Ed. Jernej Habjan/Fabienne Imlinger. London: Routledge, 2016. P. 195-212.

6 Alexander Beecroft. "Can the Global Speak?" *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée*. Forthcoming.

7 Amitav Ghosh. *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

8 Ursula K. Heise. *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

from *Madame Bovary* to *I promessi sposi* to *Middlemarch* (to say nothing of *Noli me tangere* and *El Periquillo Sarniento*) frequently explored developments of national significance from a very narrow and specific (if perhaps unspecified) provincial setting. If a generalized village in Normandy can stand in for France, then why could it (or a village in Bengal or Hunan; Sumatra or Sao Paulo State) not also stand in for the world? Perhaps the “deep, horizontal, comradeship” of the nation-state as Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community”⁹ is imagined synecdochally, such that any corner of the nation, when seen as part of the nation, becomes by that virtue representative of the whole, even as in other contexts regional difference is of course a vital part of the terrain of nationalism. As Benedict Anderson goes on to argue, both the world of the novel and the imagined community of the nation are “sociological organism[s] moving calendrically through homogeneous, empty time”¹⁰; a “clearly bounded [...] horizon” delimiting a “social space of *comparable*” institutions and structures.¹¹

But if the local community was able, in the nineteenth-century novel, to stand in for the imagined community of the nation, it seems much harder in the early twenty-first century for the local to stand in for an imagined (or imaginable) global community. In these respects, the world is not simply a nation of nations, a limit case to the imagined community (at least not yet). To the extent that the world is an imagined community at all, it is one whose members imagine their local differences to be irreducible, where a school in South Carolina cannot simply stand in for one in Saarland or Shandong or Soweto. The “fateful coalescence of cultures” which Auerbach imagined might someday become the founding myth of a new *Weltliteratur*¹², has yet to enter our imaginations in this way. The empathy which the nation-state at once fostered in and demanded of its subjects has yet to expand to the global level. Further, while globalization and climate change alike are seen as forcing change on the entire world, that change is understood everywhere as both qualitatively and quantitatively different. Globalization leaves US steelworkers unemployed in declining industrial towns, while it condemns steelworkers in India to low-wage and unsafe labor in highly polluted environments. Climate change confronts small island nations with total disappearance and desert regions with permanent unliveability, while other regions fear lower crop yields, greater need for air conditioning, or mass migration. Not only are these effects qualitatively and quantitatively different, but solidarity and

9 Benedict Anderson. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London, New York: Verso, 1991. P. 5.

10 Ibid. P. 26.

11 Ibid. P. 30.

12 Erich Auerbach. “Philology and *Weltliteratur*”. *Centennial Review* (1969): p. 1-17.

identification among those affected is neither easy nor intuitive in situations where at least superficially there appear to be winners and losers. Readers of *Madame Bovary* living in Gascony or Provence could nonetheless see aspects of the dull provincialism of their own town reflected in Flaubert's Yonville-l'Abbaye. All provincialisms are alike, or at least alike enough for imaginative empathy. It is less clear that this will prove true for the reader in Bielefeld or Cleveland encountering descriptions of a Bangladeshi village, sunk beneath the waters by climate change. Globalization and climate change alike may be problems which must be resolved on the global level, but tragically our experience of them is very much local, and if there's a good way of sharing those experiences through literature it remains unfound.

I would argue that more recent global challenges, from the emergence of the alt-right to the COVID-19 pandemic, might lend themselves in future more readily to novelistic narration, in that they do not resemble globalization and climate change in these respects. Both the alt-right and the pandemic are truly 'glocal' crises – phenomena which are taking place on a worldwide scale but which can only be experienced through their local manifestations, which necessarily differ. Unlike globalization and climate change, much of the battle must take place on local (or glocal) terrain. Alt-right political movements draw, for example, on historical *ressentiments* for much of their strength, and these are necessarily local and deeply-felt if they are to work – they are in fact usually hastily-repackaged versions of the narratives which fuelled nationalism in the first place. The basic 'business model' of the alt-right (stoking performative rage as a distraction from economic redistribution and other ameliorative policy options) is the same the world over, but that model must always be filled with local content in order to be marketable. To combat the alt-right requires an engagement with the specific socio-economic challenges of the nation, and a capacity to re-imagine the nation in a more constructive way. One size most definitely does not fit all, either in the ailment or in the cure.

We might, in fact, see the kernel of a literary genre around the emergence of the alt-right, and particularly around the narrator's escape from both the alt-right and the socio-economic despair in which it thrives. In the United States, J.D. Vance's memoir *Hillbilly Elegy*¹³, adapted into a film directed by Ron Howard in 2020, recounted the author's childhood in the post-industrial city of Middletown, Ohio in an Appalachian family dealing with drug abuse, alcoholism, marital breakdown, and economic precarity, culminating in his escape from this world to study at nearby Ohio State University. A few years earlier in France, Édouard Louis had published his first novel, *En finir*

13 J.D. Vance. *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. New York: Harper, 2016.

*avec Eddy Bellegueule*¹⁴, a strongly autobiographical account of the eponymous narrator's difficult childhood in a small village in Picardy (a region of post-industrial economic precarity), encountering alcoholism, intolerance, violence, and other crises before escaping to study at a *lycée* in nearby Amiens. There are obvious differences between these two works, and especially between their authors: Vance is a conservative (seeking the Republican nomination for a US Senate seat in Ohio in 2022) who blames a decline in traditional values, rather than economic change, for the multilayered despair of Appalachia, while Louis is a committed member of the French left, and the homophobic violence he suffers forms a significant element of his narrative. One suspects that both would resist being conjoined in a generic category. But at the same time there is a clear structural similarity between the works which gave Vance and Louis their fame, and both have written for the media on what they believe to be the appeal, respectively of Donald Trump and of Marine Le Pen to members of the white working class. Karl Ove Knausgård's six-volume *Min Kamp* (*My Struggle*) might be added to this genre, at least in part.¹⁵ As I hope my glancing comparison of the narratives of Vance and Louis has shown, there is room within the theme to develop the kind of relationship between global form and local content that was fruitful for the realist and nationalist novel of the nineteenth century. The individual young hero, struggling to free himself from the limitations of his socioeconomic situation, and seeking artistic or professional advancement, is a familiar theme, after all, and while the details of such environments vary from country to country, they have enough of a family resemblance to be readily generative of imaginative empathy. It seems likely that the future will offer more works in this nascent genre, given the sad ubiquity of both the socio-economic conditions and the politics they seem to foster. If the *Bildungsroman* has a future in the industrial and post-industrial world, this may well be the form it takes.¹⁶

The challenges posed by the alt-right to neoliberal globalization may have one other implication for world literature: a shift in the role of English. The exit of the United Kingdom from the European Union has not immediately altered the status of English as one of three working languages for EU institutions, but it is certainly plausible that, over time, the role of English in Europe may diminish. Meanwhile, the Trump administration's regular disruptions to long-standing US alliances, along with the lingering effects of the Iraq War, may also plausibly diminish the role of the United States in global affairs, causing a further retreat of English. The net effect of the alt-right,

14 Edouard Louis. *En finir avec Eddy Bellegueule : roman*. Paris: Seuil, 2014.

15 Karl Ove Knausgård. *Min Kamp* 1-6. Oslo: Forlaget Oktober, 2009-2011.

16 I am indebted to conversations with Barry McCrea for thinking about how recent economic changes have complicated the traditional novelistic narrative, a theme he will be exploring in forthcoming work.

then, may be to diminish the status of English as a global *lingua franca*, while simultaneously encouraging an inward-looking tendency in national literatures, all of which may well promote the viability of literatures in languages other than English, a viability frequently seen as under threat.¹⁷

In a somewhat different way COVID-19 has been a deeply glocal story: a story where a global force is primarily articulated and experienced in local contexts. One virus has swept the world, taking lives and wreaking economic havoc everywhere. But the impacts have been intelligible primarily on a local (national or sub-national) level, rather than on a global level. The disease which tore through Wuhan and Hubei did not initially cause as significant harm in other provinces of China. Intra-European borders, open now for decades, shut abruptly in the wake of the virus, as did borders between US and Australian states and Canadian provinces. The responses have been local, too: Swedish policy has not been German policy; behavior prohibited in California continued unabated in Florida; emergency economic measures varied wildly from place to place, and schools and restaurants opened and shut on quite distinctive rhythms everywhere. This was in part a necessary part of fighting a pandemic: different regions are at risk at different moments, and public health policy must always adapt to local circumstances to devise the most effective policy response in a given context. But in part these differences were also due to already-existing cultural and political differences between regions, which led to different responses to the pandemic.

Our worlds shrank, too, in many cases quite drastically. For varying amounts of time in different regions, physical contact was limited to the household, and often therefore to the nuclear family, excluding even grandparents and close friends. People accustomed to working, studying, or seeking entertainment in distant corners of their cities found themselves constrained to walking within their neighborhoods, while policy differences often required that borders re-emerge within and between nations. This reduction of scale: from the community to the household; from the city to the neighborhood; from the nation or continent to the province or state briefly left nearly larger-scale interactions in the realm of the virtual, though even then there were spontaneous moments of exception, from the nightly rounds of applause in some cities for hospital workers and first responders to the Black Lives Matter protests which erupted across the United States and globally in the aftermath of the police murder of George Floyd. With these noteworthy exceptions, COVID-19 inadvertently provided a temporary resolution of one of the dilemmas of the contemporary novel: how to create a form which regularly relies on distance and delay to defer the resolution of

17 See e.g. Tim Parks. "America First?" *The New York Review of Books*, July 15, 2010. www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2010/jul/15/america-first/.

plot in a world where smartphones and social media have made the instant ubiquity of information a fact of life.¹⁸

At my date of writing, it remains to be seen whether or not COVID-19 will generate significant bodies of literary fiction. Comparisons to the influenza epidemic of 1918-19 are inevitable: that catastrophe produced relatively little in the way of direct fictional representation (overshadowed in part by the First World War), though some have argued that the pandemic's shadow lurks over other works of the era as well.¹⁹ The great COVID novels, if they are ever written, will likely want to wait until a moment of greater certainty about the final direction of the pandemic, for fear of looking as dated as any pronouncements I might make here. But I would argue that there are certainly aspects of the pandemic that might lend themselves well to the conventions of the realist novel. The nature of the crisis lends itself well to being told through a family or household as a microcosm of the national (or even the global) experience, and while each patient's experience of the disease, and each family's experience of quarantine, have been different, they are again perhaps similar enough to lend themselves to empathetic comparison. Phenomena from the sudden shutdown of transportation links, to the scarcity of toilet paper or masks, to the ongoing opening-up and shutting-down of public gatherings, all are similar enough from one country to another to allow stories from one to be understood readily in another, while also being just different enough to provoke interest. Finally, as I've suggested, physical isolation may restore the conditions of slow and uncertain transmission of information necessary to the functioning of a realist narrative, while disease certainly provides its own moments of narrative suspense, its ups and downs. Even the spread of disinformation, from the simplest forms of vaccine hesitancy to the most baroque excesses of the QAnon faith, has the potential to provide its own form of narrative delay.

It may be, in other words, that it is not the global event *per se* which cannot be narrated effectively in the novel, but rather a specific kind of event whose consequences are spread unevenly but simultaneously across the globe – events that are glocal in the wrong way. For these events, like economic globalization or climate change, it may simply prove very challenging to make a part, any part, represent the whole. Other crises, like the emergence of the alt-right and COVID-19, may prove much easier to represent in this way. Moreover, the (at least temporary) sidelining of neoliberal globalization may make it easier for authors to gain domestic audiences writing about

18 On this point, see e.g. Alistair Brown. "Communication Technology and Narrative: Letters, Instant Messaging, and Mobile Phones in Three Romantic Novels." *Poetics Today* 36/1-2 (2015): p. 33-58.

19 Elizabeth Outka. *Viral Modernism: The Influenza Pandemic and Interwar Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2019.

experiences shared on a local or national scale, without first gaining credibility on the global scale. Above all, the events of the years 2016-2021 should remind us that the narrative of history, like that of a good novel, rarely moves forward in a straight line for long. Reports of the death of the novel at the hands of culture-flattening globalization and delay-annihilating communications technology may yet be greatly exaggerated.

