

‘Global Literature’ – In Search of a Definition

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The term “globalization” has acquired during the past two decades such an epistemic power that it could almost dispense with explanatory attempts. So diverse are its contexts of use that it is now much more than a concept. It is a framework in which theories are proposed and thinking takes place. The much discussed “topographical turn”¹ in human sciences has been made possible by the emergence of a global space in which ideas and values interact and modify each other.

Yet despite the impressive amount of theoretical labor encompassing the globalizing of politics, societies, or disciplines, the implications of this new reality upon the fields of literary production and research have not been thoroughly accounted for. In this paper I will try to examine more closely a single issue pertaining to this complex causality and interaction: the current boundaries of a theoretical object – “global literature” – as traced by recent studies in different cultural and academic fields.

My focus will not be on the phenomenon of globalization as such, or on the redefinition of comparative literature in this context (questions addressed by a few papers in this volume). I will discuss instead the theories of and meanings attached to the notion of “global literature.” What does it mean for a work or a writer to “go global”? (a simple answer would be: to be translated in more than 20 languages and accordingly to sell millions of copies.) Is this notion useful as a research category? Which literary disciplines are best equipped to accommodate such issues? I will look first at the contexts in which “global literature” is discussed and try to expose a few legitimating strategies (if not actual meanings) from them.

From literary globalization to global literature

Globalization was first employed to describe “the development of an increasingly integrated global economy marked especially by free trade, free flow of capital, and the tapping of cheaper foreign labor markets” (www.merriam-webster.com). An economic process became associated with strong political and social effects and interests. The corresponding notion in the field of literary study was not “literary globalization”² or “global literature” but, interestingly enough,

¹ See Michael C. Frank, “Imaginative Geography as a Travelling Concept”, in *European Journal of English Studies*, 13/1 (2009), and Sigrid Weigel, “On the ‘Topographical Turn’: Concepts of Space in Cultural Studies and *Kulturwissenschaften*. A Cartographic Feud”, in *European Review*, 17/1 (2009), for comprehensive accounts on the origins and development of this process.

² When the term is employed by a celebrated global writer as Nobel laureate Orhan Pamuk its meaning is somehow distorted as to sound optimistic: “Instead, Pamuk talked of the ‘literary globalization of the world’ and outlined the

“world” or “comparative literature”. Globalization soon acquired the status of a Foucauldian episteme, a sort of synonym for “postmodernity”³, a frame of reference in which contemporary literature was easily situated. We deal here with a pattern of transfer from one field (defined by the advance of postindustrial capitalism, ICT development, and the like) to another (cultural/literary). The difficulties inherent to such a shift are emphasized by Jean Bessière (“How to reform comparative literature’s paradigms in the age of globalization”, in *Neohelicon*, XXVIII/1/2001). Bessière comments on a discontinuity that is difficult to surpass:

any direct application of the notion or reality of globalization to other fields, and especially to literatures, may appear groundless, because, most often, literary works are not written from a global perspective, although they may reflect that global perspective (14).

There is an inherent ambiguity with this term that has consequences: contemporary literature is/tends to some extent to be globalized, and at the same time globalization is a theme of reflection for this literature. Moreover this transfer presupposes a change of emphasis – from the process (global-ization) to its result (becoming global). A similar discursive (and epistemological) dynamics was involved in the invention of “the Orient” as investigated by Edward W. Said (*Orientalism*, 1978). The transfer as such is problematic since it reactivates the mechanism of domination⁴ and places the source discourse in the position of an explanatory metanarrative (see Bessière, Lyotard).

Jean Bessière’s approach starts from Bourdieu’s sociological analysis of the cultural/artistic field as relatively autonomous from the field of power⁵; thus he does not push to the limit Said’s relativistic premise (which could lead to a perception of globalization as one of the constructs of imaginative geography). If we were to reread Bourdieu in this context, the interaction might lead to the emergence of a different *forma mentis* and to what H. R. Jauss has earlier termed “the social function of literature” (“Literaturgeschichte als Provokation der Literaturwissenschaft”, 1969). In other words literary globalization would mean that a new audience is being formed, one prepared to read beyond national literary traditions and gradually rework its immediate or larger social context through its literary representation.

The global as pharmakon

Another, perhaps more adequate, proximate genus for “global literature” is postcolonial theory. Seen as a departure from imperialism the global turn appears as a redemption, “a cure for the ills

way the novelist’s imagination -- when employed to evoke ‘the other, the stranger, the enemy that resonates inside each of our heads’ -- can be a powerful, liberating force.” (quoted by *The Washington Post*, October 30, 2007)

³ See for instance Stuart Hall’s category of the “global post-modern” (“The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity.” *Culture, Globalization, and the World-System*. Ed. Anthony D. King. Binghamton, NY: Department of Art and Art History, State U of New York at Binghamton P, 1991).

⁴ For a critical perspective on globalization as the “age of empire”, see Antonio Negri, “Art and Culture in the Age of Empire and the Time of the Multitudes”, in *SubStance* #112, 36/1 (2007).

⁵ For instance, in *Les Règles de l’art: genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris: Seuil, 1998.

of postcolonialism”, as Peter Kalliney assesses⁶. And he furthermore adds: “We need to evaluate, in other words, whether or not globalization theory represents the logical next phase of postcolonial literary scholarship.” (52) Nevertheless when Linda Hutcheon looks for a way out the rigid pattern of national literary histories, she only discovers the return of the teleological model employed by European literary historical narratives in the 19th century. Hutcheon stages a cultural drama with a meaning yet to decide: “earlier European imperialism created a ‘web of global commitments’”⁷ (drawing on Stuart Hall’s work on globalization and ethnicity); the only gain is that “the nation is now no longer the single dominant defining power in supranational imperialisms” (25). In other words globalization as a theoretical construct has a tendency towards self-undermining and deconstruction which functions by turning Westernization or Americanization against themselves.⁸

More confident about the heuristic value of “global literature” is Vilashini Cooppan in “World Literature and Global Theory: Comparative Literature for the New Millennium” (2001). The emergence of a “transnational, transregional, global literature” as she calls it involves in the same measure a reworking of the past literary tradition(s). The same old corpus requires new readings to survive. In the vein of Homi Bhabha’s paradigmatic narrative (*The Location of Culture*, 1994), Cooppan focuses on “the colonized, the migrants, the refugees” and their literary productions/ representations. Yet one cannot help wondering whether this transfer of present research methodologies to past literary traditions is more justified than the travels of contemporary theories from one discipline to another. She suggests that the most appropriate and effective impact of globalization in literary studies concerns the transformation of audiences and reading practices: “(...) we could all of us begin to read globally. Globalized reading meant giving up the certitudes of the center in favor of the difficulties of dissemination” (39). One can see why this turn is most appealing to postcolonial thinking.

Exile or migrant writing?

A shift from the circuits of reception to those of production occurs when one considers the circumstances under which a global literature takes shape. To this respect an undoubtedly privileged category is that of exile/migrant writers. The composite field of *diaspora studies* thus became well situated for an analysis of globalization’s effects on contemporary writing. “Diasporization and globalization can thus be considered as coeval processes, with globalization having the most impact on the contemporary phase”, states Michele Reis in “Theorizing Diaspora: Perspectives on ‘Classical’ and ‘Contemporary’ Diaspora” (Reis 2004, 47). Reis embraces Appadurai’s account (1996) on the leveling effect of globalization as concerns the public and private spheres, the social classes, the local and the national, a.s.o. Contemporary diasporas are much more connected to their home country than anytime in the past; their

⁶ “Globalization, Postcoloniality, and the Problem of Literary Studies in the Satanic Verses”, in *Modern Fiction Studies*, Volume 48, number 1, Spring 2002, p. 51.

⁷ Linda Hutcheon, “Postcolonial Witnessing – and Beyond: Rethinking Literary History Today”, in *Neohelicon* 30 (2003) 1, p. 25.

⁸ Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996; Paul Jay, “Beyond Discipline? Globalization and the Future of English”, *PMLA*, Vol. 116, No. 1, Special Topic: Globalizing Literary Studies (Jan., 2001), pp. 32-47.

formation and existence have been de-dramatized. What does this imply when it comes to the literary production originating from these (*virtual* as well as *imagined*) communities?

The advantages of an external position have been noticed by theorists such as Pascale Casanova and John Neubauer when writing about the possibility of a transnational, European literature.⁹ At a larger scale, the experience of circulation between cultures and languages has proven to be ideal for the apparition of a different way of being in the world. Recently the concept of “migrant writing” tends to replace (as better suited to the context) that of “exile literature” (see Walkowitz, 2006; Mardorossian, 2002). Then is migrant literature to be read as global literature? Definitely not (always). Both concepts involve a hesitation between intention (as seen in the choice of theme, for instance) and effect (large circulation by means of translations, adaptations, etc.). The local, “very Turkish” quality of many of Orhan Pamuk’s novels does not prevent them from travelling globally. Moreover, a typology that involves the experience of the writer to such an extent in determining the nature of his/her writing displays a narrow deterministic vision on literary creation.

The Global Pop

One does not have to be a keen observer of the cultural market to notice that pop culture is much more globalized than high culture. Children’s literature (Narnia or Harry Potter series, to point to the obvious), or comics, or science fiction have long been globally priced. In an insightful essay that addresses the changes – and challenges - brought about by globalization, Sieghild Bogumil draws the readers’ attention towards the potential of the new media also. Since the understanding of textuality was radically transformed by the Internet, the hypertext, and more recently by the idea of an *open access* literary culture¹⁰, Bogumil pleads in favour of a broad meaning of “global literature”:

on the one hand it means the desire to open literature to the other cultural practices in such a manner that literature would figure as one among them, and, on the other hand, it means the claim to take account of all kind of texts in the generic as well as in the geographic sense. (...) That is why the notion of world literature, dealing even in the most overt sense with books and aesthetics, as mentioned above, does not fit and has to be replaced by the term global literature.¹¹ (48)

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In order to justify – if that would be the case – the use of this theoretical coinage, “global literature” has to establish, on one hand, a network of references to other related concepts (world and comparative literature mostly, but also “local”/ national literature), and to be clearly distinguishable from any of them, on the other. What does “global” mean when it comes to literature?

⁹ See Pascale Casanova, *la République mondiale des lettres*, 1999, and John Neubauer, “Voices from Exile: A Literature for Europe?”, in *European Review*, 17/ 1 (2009).

¹⁰ See Simone Murray, “‘Remix my Lit’: Towards an Open Access *Literary Culture*”, in *Convergence*, 16/1 (2010): 23-38.

¹¹ Sieghild Bogumil, “Comparative Literature, Globalization, and Heterotopia,” in *Neohelicon*, XXVIII/I (2001).

The temptation to interpret it as a synonym for “**world literature**” is huge. I will not review here the impressive amount of scholarship¹² devoted during the past years to the theorizing of world literature, starting from Goethe’s *Weltliteratur*, revaluing the contribution of the German school of stylistic criticism (mostly Erich Auerbach’s), up to the incorporation of current disciplinary developments in comparative literature. It is more useful instead to show why “global” does not mean “world” here.

First and foremost, because “global literature” gestures towards its general readership, whereas the delineation of “world literature” is a matter of critical response and canon formation.¹³ The fact that literary tradition also became global (through school and university curricula, educational migrancy, a.s.o.) does not make the two concepts interchangeable. The corpus of world literature might be moving towards the encounter with a global readership, as David Damrosch’s remark on the expanding tendency of world literature might suggest.¹⁴ Yet “global” has a contemporary appeal, while “world” in “world literature” embraces the past and by doing that, it triggers a series of issues of cultural dialogue and interpretation.

When John Pizer in exploring the relations between Goethe’s original notion of *Weltliteratur* and its contemporary career employs the two terms as synonyms¹⁵, he might be doing that as an argument for the continuity of the first concept that he endeavors to stress. Both terms’ reference points toward a larger representation of “the real” that is of course influenced by the general systems of perception of their time.

Very accurate in his theoretical proposal is Ian Baucom who distinguishes between two uses of global literary studies (as an emerging disciplinary framework for “globalit”), as *project* and as *method*:

By *project* I intend the appeal to reconfigure literary study as the study of something called global literature. By *method* I mean the global spread of particular ways of studying something called literature.¹⁶ (162)

¹² Most influential being David Damrosch’s *What Is World Literature?*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

¹³ In an influential study on “World Literature and World Politics: In Search of a Research Agenda”, published in *Global Society* (2003), Gerard Holden writes: “today, the term [world literature] is more likely to be used to refer to the totality, or the best, of past and present global literary production” (231). And few lines below: “more frequently (...) used in English to denote the subject matter of comparative literature” (231). There are of course several issues to be further explored here (“totality” as opposed to “the best”; or “past” and “present” in connection with “global”.) Anyway the notion of world literature is value-centered in its narrow sense.

¹⁴ In “World Literature Today: From the Old World to the Whole World”, in *Symploke*, 8/1 (2000): 7-19.

¹⁵ “With the globalization of the world economy, a true world literature, which is to say a *global* literature, is being created.”; John Pizer, “Goethe’s ‘World Literature’ Paradigm and Contemporary Cultural Globalization”, in *Comparative Literature*, 52/3 (2000): 213-227.

¹⁶ Ian Baucom, “Globalit, Inc.; Or, the Cultural Logic of Global Literary Studies”, in *PMLA*, 116/ 1, Special Topic: Globalizing Literary Studies, 2001: 158-172.

Definitely global literature represents an actual stage in a long history, a stage that is marked by an increased awareness of the interconnectedness of literary cultures.

I would suggest to view “literature” and “global literature” as sharing the extension involved in their broad meaning (the total of literary production...) while the narrower meanings are divergent (aesthetic value, canonical relevance, *literariness*, on the one hand; thematic and contextual aspects activated on the other hand). The two concepts interfere but cannot substitute one another.

The distinction between *global* and *comparative literature* appears in a way to be more definite (object vs discipline). Comparative literature’s approach has always been relational and transnational; only that now the density of contacts and networks involved is overwhelming.¹⁷ It goes without saying that the traditional notion of literary influence and its implicit hierarchical constructions are overcome. As Sieghild Bogumil insists, global literature is not: an addition of all literatures of the world; a collection of the most important/influential literatures; or the ensemble of the functionally linked ones (Bogumil 2001, 51).

In this respect – global literature as a reinterpretation of comparative literature’s traditional scope –, Franco Moretti’s use of the wave metaphor¹⁸ to account for “the great unread” looks very appropriate for its ability to “observ[e] uniformity engulfing an initial diversity” (30). So the irony involved in the coincidence of the complit crisis and the advent of global literary studies¹⁹ is only a matter of temporary concern, since comparative literature is able to readjust its tools to deal with this challenging object.

It will probably be helpful to view global literature as embracing two stages, similarly with comparative literature: a modern one that was characterized by direct cultural contact and influence (Moretti’s tree pattern); and a more recent stage that involves less rereading and value construction, and more of a sense of rapid flows of circulation – a fast developing binary code structured on the logic of success and failure.

Finally, the complex dialectics of the *global* and **the local** seems to have been resolved by its synthesis in the *glocal*.²⁰ As handy as it may look, “the global” is not just the extension or the translation of the local. Nor it is homogeneous and easy to grasp. Both “global” and “local” are loaded terms. Analyzing the intricate representations involved in their construction, Chun Allen writes (“On the Geopolitics of Identity”, 2009):

¹⁷ For a provocative and astute reading of the state of the discipline in global times see Haun Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

¹⁸ In “Conjectures on World Literature”, *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 54-69.

¹⁹ Noticed by Francesco Loriggio in his study on “Disciplinary Memory as Cultural History: Comparative Literature, Globalization, and the Categories of Criticism”, in *Comparative Literature Studies*, 41/1 (2004): 49-79.

²⁰ A sociologically informed analysis of “the glocal” is undertaken by Robert Eric Livingston in “Glocal Knowledges: Agency and Place in Literary Studies”, *PMLA*, 116/1, Special Topic: Globalizing Literary Studies (Jan., 2001): 145-157.

even more disturbingly, we seem to know a priori what is global and what is local, even before the phenomenon is invoked. There are even many global phenomena that have literally become universal, although they are rarely characterized as such. We do not call cars or phones global, much less western; they are just modern. (...) there are implicit value judgments associated with global and local, despite our best attempts to define them in neutral, analytical terms. Their relative positional status is one that inscribes or reflects a castle-like hierarchy. (345)

The same holds true for the relationship between national literatures and global literature. The latter is not a sum of national literatures but questions the very relevance of this concept and consequently provokes it to reinvent itself.

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The conclusion of this survey cannot but be provisional and moderate. "Global literature" is a concept whose resources and heuristic force are to be further tested. Presumably, "it would be the result of a comparative method respecting literatures as heterotopias which at the same time form a whole" (Bogumil 2001, 52). The disciplines or interdisciplinary projects that are called to develop and frame it count, among others, literary and cultural studies, area studies,²¹ even literary international relations (according to Holden, 2003), cultural history, even ethnography (James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 1988). And last, but not least, *global literary studies*, which undergoes a similar process of development.

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²¹ Whose reinvention Spivak advocates in *Death of a Discipline*, 2003.

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