

World Literature and Literary Value: Is “Global” The New “Lowbrow?”*

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This paper is about the critical debates surrounding contemporary novels with a global reach, especially those written by non-Western authors, but highly successful on the Western literary market, such as Haruki Murakami’s and Orhan Pamuk’s works. A close analysis of the evaluative terms used in these debates, epitomized by Tim Parks’s coinage “the dull new global novel,” reveals that they conflate two distinct lines of argument. Fashioned as a materialist narrative about cultural hegemony in the globalized world, these critiques turn out to be motivated by a much older concern to preserve a literary elite. “The global” and its opposite, “the local,” start to sound like code words for “highbrow” and “lowbrow,” and, seen in this light, the whole critical debate about the new global novel appears as an attempt to sidestep a direct engagement with the ever-elusive question of literary value.

Keywords: world literature, literary value, aesthetic value, global novel, global literature, canon formation, literature in translation, Haruki Murakami, Tim Parks

What an exciting time for a literary taxonomist: apparently, a new genre has been born, and it is rapidly taking over the world. Its undisputed master is supposed to be Haruki Murakami, and among the several competing names that have already been coined for it, one is particularly endearing: “the dull new global novel.”¹ The texts that belong to this new genre have two characteristic features. They are written by non-Western authors, but become very successful on the Western literary market. That is because, the story goes, these books are “eminently translatable:” they “eschew the idiosyncrasy of the local for the interchangeability of the global.”² In other words, the

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* **Acknowledgements:** An earlier version of this paper was awarded the 2017 American Comparative Literature Association’s Presidential Master’s Prize for the best master’s thesis. I would like to thank Ato Quayson, Katrin Kohl, and Adriana Jacobs, who all provided me with valuable comments and generous encouragement at various stages of this project. I would also like to thank the Ertegun Graduate Scholarship Programme for the Humanities, which supported my research at the time of writing this piece.

1 See Tim Parks, “The Dull New Global Novel,” *The New York Review of Books*, February 9, 2010, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/09/the-dull-new-global-novel>, accessed March 20, 2016.

2 Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 31; Walkowitz summarizes here positions held by Emily Apter, Tim Parks, and other critics.

authors of “the dull new global novel” choose to write in a neutral style that is easier to render in translation rather than engaging creatively with the resources of their native languages. Moreover, they avoid references to the intricacies of their own cultures and local literary traditions, and instead use motifs and narrative strategies familiar to the Western reader. The central argument in the critical debate surrounding this new phenomenon is that this literature is written for export, and therefore participates in the processes of capitalist cultural hegemony. In the globalized world, the West—and in particular the United States—exerts a powerful influence on non-Western cultures, and at the same time is an overwhelming competitor on the local markets. As a consequence, it is more economically viable for a non-Western writer to make a successful career in the West rather than in her country of origin. To this end, she must cater to the Western tastes, and because her own culture is already affected by the aggressive expansion of US-American culture, she knows how to do it. This prevalent critique of “the dull new global novel” sounds like a classic materialist argument.

I would like to challenge this master narrative. A closer analysis of the evaluative terms used in the debate about contemporary global novels sheds new light on its underlying motivations. The two critical terms that play the crucial role in this context are “the global” and its supposed opposite, “the local”: the new globally oriented literature versus local literary traditions. The way in which these two terms are deployed in discussions of contemporary literature written by non-Westerners, but commercially successful in the West, suggests that what in fact bothers many critics about these books is less the way in which they negotiate the politically fraught situation in which local traditions are pitted against a global appeal, but rather their perceived low aesthetic value. Upon closer observation, an undercurrent of elitism is revealed in an ostensibly materialist argument: “the local” and “the global” start to sound like code words for “highbrow” and “lowbrow,” and, seen in this light, the whole critical debate about the new global novel appears as an attempt to sidestep a direct engagement with the ever-elusive question of literary value.

The phrase “the dull new global novel” was coined in 2010 by Tim Parks, an English writer and literary critic for *The New York Review of Books*, and has been taken up—or contested—by many others ever since. The two authors most frequently placed in this category are Haruki Murakami and Orhan Pamuk. They also have their counterparts in other forms of art: the poet Bei Dao, the filmmaker Park Chan-wook, and so on.³ Since I wrote the first version of this paper in January 2016, I have been seeing two new names repeatedly discussed in similar terms—Elena Ferrante and Han Kang. The inclusion of Ferrante on this list shows that the category of non-Western literature is flexible. A recent short book by Adam Kirsch, *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century*, discusses Murakami, Pamuk, and Ferrante alongside Mohsin Hamid, Roberto Bolaño, Chimamanda Adichie, Margaret Atwood, and Michel Houellebecq.⁴ In an essay review of Kirsch’s book, Siddhartha Deb wonders

3 Bei Dao’s case gave rise to an animated scholarly discussion in the 1990s: see Stephen Owen, “What Is World Poetry?,” *The New Republic*, November 19, 1990, 28–32; Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora: Tactics of Intervention in Contemporary Cultural Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 1–5; and David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 18–24.

4 See Adam Kirsch, *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

whether “global” has become a catchall term “ultimately defined by whatever the United States”—and Great Britain, I would add—“is not.”⁵ The fact that English-speaking writers also make it to compilations like this is particularly significant as it has consequences for the argument about the supposed easy translatability of global novels; I will return to this issue later.

But first let us focus on books written by Murakami, Pamuk, Ferrante, Kang, and other authors who purportedly belong in the same category of literature, which has been described, according to a catalog of recurring invectives put together by David Damrosch and Jonathan Culler, as “new globally directed works all too *easy* to understand”;⁶ “works produced primarily for foreign consumption;”⁷ airport novels or “romans de gare,” that is, mass-market paperbacks sold to travelers at airport or train station newsstands;⁸ “global babble;”⁹ testament to the “Disneyfication”¹⁰ or “McDonaldization of the globe;”¹¹ “market realism;”¹² and “contemporary world literature [that] isn’t worth the effort it doesn’t require.”¹³ What all these names and descriptions have in common is the emphasis on the complicity of those books with capitalistic modes of production and consumption in the globalized world. On this account, the new global novel is a depressing testimony to the crushing power of US-American cultural hegemony. Under the thin veneer of superficial diversity—the nationality of the authors of these books ranges from Japanese to Turkish—the new global novel in fact serves to solidify the existing inequalities in the cultural field. In other words, the popularity of these texts testifies to the “instrumentalizing [of] the literatures of the world as objects of neo-colonial usurpation and imperial subsumption”¹⁴ rather than to the diversification of Western literary tastes. At its core, the cultural hegemony argument seems to be a moral argument: it condemns globalization on moral grounds and disapproves of the new global novel as its product.

On this account, the generic features of the new global novel—the absence of cultural idiosyncrasy and the lack of engagement with non-Western artistic techniques, whose place is taken by tropes and literary devices familiar to the Western reader—are explained according to “a familiar scenario of asymmetry in international power [. . .:] a culture of the periphery is intersected and altered by another culture from the core that completely ignores it.”¹⁵ Non-Western cultures are transformed by the Western culture, but this process is deeply one-sided: the West remains ignorant about the cultural heritage of the cultures it engulfs in the process of globalization. Gayatri Spivak has memorably argued that “in spite of the fact that the effects of globalization can be felt all over the world, that there are satellite dishes in Nepalese villages, the

5 Siddhartha Deb, “The Rise of the Global Novelist,” *New Republic*, April 25, 2017, <https://newrepublic.com/article/141676/rise-global-novelist-adam-kirsch-review>, accessed August 5, 2017.

6 Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 18.

7 *Ibid.*, 18.

8 *Ibid.*, 17.

9 Janet Abu-Lughod quoted in Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 5.

10 Jonathan D. Culler, “Whither Comparative Literature,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 3 (2006): 94.

11 Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 25.

12 Tariq Ali quoted in Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, 18.

13 *Ibid.*, 19.

14 Djelal Kadir quoted in Culler, “Whither Comparative Literature,” 94.

15 Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” *New Left Review* 1 (2000): 56.

opposite is never true. The everyday cultural detail, condition and effect of sedimented cultural idiom, does not come up into satellite country.”¹⁶ This argument becomes problematic, however, when it is applied to literary production. Pankaj Mishra, a contemporary Indian novelist, has warned that “the homogenising and depoliticising effects of the ‘global novel’ can also be exaggerated, to the point where every writer of non-western origin seems to be vending a consumable—rather than a challenging—cultural otherness.”¹⁷ Mishra goes on to discuss several instances of works written by authors such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, who develop challenging visions of cultural otherness. His article is fashioned as a response to two critics of “the dull new global novel”—as it happens, two white British novelists: Tim Parks and Philip Hensher.¹⁸ Even though Mishra does not defend any specific writers that Parks and Hensher classify as the representatives of “the dull new global novel,” he argues that non-Western authors cannot write outside of the process of globalization for the simple reason that their local cultures have already been altered by this very process.

This kind of critical attitude is in tune with Homi Bhabha’s argument about cultural hybridity. Bhabha has argued that “the ‘locality’ of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it,” which means that cultural criticism needs to “turn boundaries and limits into the *in-between* spaces through which the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated.”¹⁹ This model is potentially more productive than the cultural hegemony argument. Although it does not deny cultural inequalities, it nevertheless does not assume that non-Western artists have no autonomy to engage with the particular cultural configuration in which they live and work. This approach is increasingly often seen as the precondition of any kind of meaningful comparative critical study at all. In the introduction to a recent issue of the British journal *Comparative Critical Studies*, the editors wrote: “as soon as all cultures in the conversation are conceived of as messy conglomerates as opposed to models of uniformity, then there is more likelihood that we pay attention to the areas of overlap and interaction.”²⁰ This model of cultural hybridity can be a more productive way to account for the emergence of the new global novel than the cultural hegemony argument.

But I do not think that this model is likely to appeal to the critics of “the dull new global novel.” For them, it might sound too much like a display of naive liberal political sensibility—a feature that, Tim Parks argues, readers judge books by in absence of an “aesthetic sense:” “as Borges once remarked, most people have so little aesthetic sense they rely on other criteria to judge the works they read” – and in the case of “the dull new global novel,” those “other criteria” amount to clear markers of

16 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 16.

17 Pankaj Mishra, “Beyond the Global Novel,” *Financial Times*, September 27, 2013, <https://next.ft.com/content/6e00ad86-26a2-11e3-9dc0-00144feab7de>, accessed March 20, 2016.

18 See Parks, “The Dull New Global Novel” and Philip Hensher, “‘Well, That’s the End of the Booker Prize, Then,’” *The Guardian*, September 18, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/sep/18/booker-prize-us-writers-end>, accessed March 20, 2016.

19 Homi K. Bhabha, ed. *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 4.

20 Matthew Reynolds, Mohamed-Salah Omri, and Ben Morgan, “Guest Editors’ Introduction,” *Comparative Critical Studies* 12 (2015): 155.

liberal political sensibility.²¹ That's a curious juxtaposition: on the one hand, we have "aesthetic sense," the canonical figure of Borges and a small circle of literary initiates; on the other, political liberalism and the preachers of globalism, which is perceived to be the epitome of bad taste.

A closer look at this juxtaposition reveals the biggest weakness of the cultural hegemony argument against the global novel, which is that it relies on a confusion about the meaning of the "local," as opposed to "global," qualities of a literary work. Once this confusion is clarified, the cultural hegemony argument turns out to rest on controversial assumptions about literary style and value. Beneath the materialist surface of this argument lurks an altogether different tradition: the tradition of Eurocentric elitism. To appreciate the extent to which the critiques of the new global novel have an elitist undertone, it is therefore necessary to have a closer look at the supposed opposite of "the global," which I have largely ignored so far: "the local."

What does this elusive term refer to? Two intuitive ways to define it are, first, the local color or flavor of a foreign text, and, second, the national tradition from which that text comes. Both of these understandings, however, do not seem to correspond to the meaning of "the local" in the cultural hegemony argument. The local flavor refers to a superficial layer of cultural detail, such as the association of Japan with kimonos, sushi, sake, and cherry trees. In fact, several critics of the new global literature have argued that the presence of the local flavor serves to merely mask the absence of any meaningful local context: they see it as a vivid illustration of the way in which "globalizing America colonizes various cultures, representing them by a bit of local flavour."²² In the cultural hegemony argument, "the local" cannot mean "the national" either. The proponents of that argument do not tend to criticize the wider field of comparative cultural criticism that is based on the recognition that there are more illuminating ways to talk about literature than in the context of national histories and cultures. Moreover, the category of "the national" is just as much a product of cultural hegemony as "the global." This is because establishing a firmly delineated cultural identity for the colonizing nations played a key role in the process of colonization, as it served to distinguish oneself from the colonized Other. Moreover, many colonized territories were artificially arranged into separate nations by the colonizing powers. In fact, studying and narrating national literary histories came into prominence as an academic discipline in the nineteenth century and paralleled the era of colonial conquest. In the light of this history, the cultural hegemony argument would be self-defeating if it identified the category of "the local" with the concept of "the national" because the creation of the latter was itself in many ways a hegemonic project.

The most plausible candidate for the meaning of "the local" in the cultural hegemony argument is the concept of untranslatability, as developed by Emily Apter.²³ The emphasis on linguistic and cultural untranslatability has been Apter's way to resist the "tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability, or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded 'differences' that have been niche-marketed as commercialized

21 Parks, "The Dull New Global Novel."

22 Culler, "Whither Comparative Literature," 94.

23 See Emily Apter, *Against World Literature* (London: Verso, 2013).

'identities.'²⁴ The argument here is that "the local" designates cultural specificity that is particular to a given community and never fully intelligible to an outsider.²⁵ For Apter, the locus of this cultural specificity is language. This is a crucial point: if "the local" resides in language, then the only way for the authors of the new global novel to circumvent the problem of untranslatability is to write in a carefully designed form of language that is as neutral as possible and artificially rooted out of its proper cultural ground. Rebecca Walkowitz has recently discussed this argument in the context of translation studies. She observes how works that are "difficult to translate are celebrated for their engagement with a specific national language and for their refusal to enter, or enter easily, into the pipeline of multinational publishing," whereas works that are easy to translate "are vilified for having surrendered to that pipeline, exchanging aesthetic innovation for commercial success, eschewing the idiosyncrasy of the local for the interchangeability of the global"; but, she goes on to point out, "this turn away from translation is something of a return. The notion that important literary texts have a distinctive language and that they are intended for a specific group of competent readers has been the reigning intellectual paradigm for at least the past century."²⁶ This is the crux of the matter: as soon as the cultural hegemony argument addresses the question of language, it becomes an argument about literary style; and as soon as the debate shifts to the question of style, it enters the territory of aesthetic evaluation—and we end up with the incongruent juxtaposition of a narrow elite of Borges aficionados who read for aesthetic pleasure and the global masses who read Murakami for phantoms of liberal politics.

If "the local" is understood as stylistic sophistication, its opposite—"the global"—must mean a lack of stylistic refinement. This is indeed the conclusion reached by the most outspoken critics of "the dull new global novel." In a 2013 article entitled "Literature Without Style," Tim Parks continues his argument about the new global novel, claiming that "style is predicated on a strict relation to a specific readership, and the more that readership is diluted or extended, particularly if it includes foreign-language readers, the more difficult it is for a text of any stylistic density to be successful."²⁷ According to Parks, this difficulty accounts for the stylistic plainness of the new global novel that is written for export. But he does not stop there. He immediately goes on to juxtapose this situation with the role that stylistic sophistication used to play in the past: "A work of literature would establish a reputation in its culture of origin, first among critics who were presumably equipped to appreciate it, then among the larger public; only later, sometimes many years later, would it perhaps be translated by those cosmopolitan literati who wished to make it

24 Ibid., 2.

25 A similar argument has been made by Doris Sommer in her book *Proceed with Caution*, where she shows that certain books written by minority authors are predicated on their inaccessibility to outside groups. But at least some of Sommer's examples—Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, Toni Morrison—are successful in translation and read around the world, which shows that cultural specificity need not always be impediment to global circulation. Sommer's analyses in fact show how it can become a literary strategy engaging the reader. See Doris Sommer, *Proceed with Caution, When Engaged by Minority Writing in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

26 Walkowitz, *Born Translated*, 31–32.

27 Tim Parks, "Literature Without Style," *The New York Review of Books*, November 7, 2013, <http://www.nybooks.com/daily/2013/11/07/literature-without-style>, accessed March 20, 2016.

known in another country.” This model of circulation of literature is decidedly elitist. The burden of admitting a text into the canon of works worthy of circulation lies with the academic elite—the “critics who are equipped to appreciate it” and the “cosmopolitan literati” who choose to translate it. What Parks begrudges is the fact that “the dull new global novel” does not undergo this process of legitimization by the self-professed cultural elite. The “style” in his “literature without style” is not a neutral term denoting any particular use of language, but a very specific type of literary expression associated with the Eurocentric canon.

In her book, Rebecca Walkowitz does not discuss Haruki Murakami in any detail; however, a recent essay by Stephen Snyder presents Murakami’s texts—without using the term—as “born translated” in the multiple sense given to this phrase by Walkowitz.²⁸ Unlike Walkowitz, however, Snyder—who is a professor of Japanese and a translator from Japanese to English—is deeply sceptical about the aesthetic value of this phenomenon and is much more ready to dub it, with Tim Parks, “the dull new global novel.” Snyder juxtaposes Murakami with another contemporary Japanese writer, Minae Mizumura, who is supposed to embody the valuable rootedness in local literary traditions renounced by Murakami. Snyder’s categories, however, also oscillate between the political and ostensibly objective—“global” and “local”—and the aesthetic and clearly evaluative—“popular” and “elitist.” To understand Mizumura’s first novel, a response to the unfinished *opus magnum* by the most celebrated Japanese modernist writer, Natsume Sōseki, the reader must be so intimately familiar with Japanese literary history that in effect it can be accessible to only “a handful of experts” outside Japan, Snyder writes. But if we imagine a similar endeavor by an Anglophone writer—a response to *Ulysses*, perhaps—it is not just foreign readers unfamiliar with Joyce who will be unable to appreciate it, but also every speaker of English who hasn’t studied Irish modernism in detail. In other words, what Snyder values in Mizumura seems to have less to do with the untranslatability of her work and more with her self-conscious reaffirming of the highbrow literary canon.

Even if we take Snyder’s argument about untranslatability at face value, however, it turns out to be ridden with paradoxes. Snyder cites Franz Kafka—an author frequently alluded to by Murakami—as a paragon of “resistance to translation” practiced by Mizumura. This seems rather misguided: Kafka was a trilingual author who proved to be uncommonly successful in translation. If Snyder berates Murakami for consciously shaping the style of his texts to render them easier for translation, he should also note that various features of Kafka’s texts have the same quality: almost absolute absence of geographical and temporal markings, the infamous “Kafkaesque” quality that might often be misunderstood but has certainly proved very attractive to readers around the world, and so on. Tim Parks’s examples of literature that is purportedly “untranslatable” in the age of “the dull new global novel” are equally puzzling: Jane Austen is another author who has been and still is phenomenally successful in translation, not to mention Shakespeare.

Once we stop insisting from the outset on tacitly using loaded evaluative terms to describe the kind of writing that Murakami does, his linguistic strategy could be

28 Stephen Snyder, “The Murakami Effect,” *Literary Hub*, January 4, 2017, <http://lithub.com/the-murakami-effect>, accessed August 5, 2017.

thought of as imaginative constrained writing, similar to Georges Perec's novel *La Disparition* (1969), which was written without words containing the letter "e" (a supposedly "untranslatable" novel that has been ingeniously translated into several languages). If Murakami really does write in a way that makes translation unproblematic, that surely is a remarkable linguistic achievement. Everybody who has ever tried their hand at translating any literary text at all will know that almost every sentence is ridden with challenges because no two languages have vocabularies and grammars and semantic ranges that match up one to one. On a purely technical level, writing long novels that are very easy to translate would hardly be a lesser achievement than writing in a culturally specific way that is hard to convey to an outsider.

Snyder's specific example of Mizumura's untranslatability—the title of one of her books includes a polysemous adjective that could be rendered in English as "true," "genuine" or "orthodox"—is hardly convincing. Words that have no straightforward equivalent in another language occur in every literary and nonliterary text, simply because of the nature of linguistic systems. Snyder could have mentioned that the allusion to George Orwell in the title of Murakami's greatest hit, *1Q84*, hinges on a Japanese pun: the word for "nine" is pronounced "kiu" in Japanese, the same as the letter "q." Similarly, the Turkish words used as the title of Orhan Pamuk's biggest literary success—*Kar (Snow)*—connect the name of the novel's protagonist, "Ka," and its setting, a city called "Kars." Clearly, then, it is not the presence of untranslatable puns that determines the literary quality of a book in the eyes of a literary critic like Snyder or Parks. It is rather an "untranslatability" synonymous with inaccessibility for an untrained reader, even if he or she is a native speaker of the language in question. Thus, Adam Kirsch's question regarding whether there can "be a global novel that is at once richly textured and widely legible, or [whether there is] always a trade-off between these values"²⁹ would still make sense if we crossed out the word "global" from it. This question could then be posed in a discussion about any single national or linguistic tradition: can there be a novel that is at once "richly textured" – written in a style defying easy comprehension and alluding to cultural heritage unknown to readers without a certain educational background – and "widely legible" which is an exact opposite of the former?

Those who criticize the new global novel make a curious plea: good books must require considerable effort and rare reading skills, which by definition cannot ever become widespread, whereas a global novel—again by definition—is a book that is widely read. The current debate about the good "local" literature and the bad "global" literature can thus be seen as a new incarnation of the old debate about the good "elite" literature and the bad "popular" literature. The link between non-Western literature and "lowbrow" literature has long been so persistent in criticism that it underlies even Fredric Jameson's famous attempt to validate the literary study of non-Western texts. Jameson, a prominent US-American Marxist critic, began his influential article "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" by comparing non-Western literature (which he calls "third-world literature") to other

29 Adam Kirsch, "Murakami vs. Bolaño: Competing Visions of the Global Novel," *Literary Hub*, April 24, 2017, <http://lithub.com/murakami-vs-bolano-competing-visions-of-the-global-novel>, accessed August 5, 2017.

noncanonical forms of literature, such as detective fiction. He then went on to denounce “the strategy of trying to prove that these [noncanonical] texts are as ‘great’ as those of the canon itself” and professed that “the third-world novel will not offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce.”³⁰ The focus of Jameson’s article is to suggest that non-Western literature must be always read in terms of a political allegory, a claim that has problems of its own.³¹ In the context of my discussion of “the dull new global novel,” it is a connection that Jameson makes on the margin of his main argument that is particularly striking. It is his conflation of non-Western literature and popular literature, neither of which can “offer the satisfactions of Proust or Joyce.” The choice of two icons of European modernism, and the claim that there is a categorical difference between the experience of reading them and the experience of reading a detective novel *or* a non-Western narrative, presupposes that there is something inherently unsophisticated about non-Western literature. This presupposition anticipates the argument about the lack of stylistic refinement of “the dull new global novel” written by the non-Western authors as a pale imitation of the European literary traditions familiar to the Western reader.

In the critiques of the new global novel, the overwhelming majority of works that are described with the epithet “global,” used in a pejorative sense, are written by non-Western authors. Middle-class non-Western authors with an extensive experience of the West are thus criticized for creating “global” literature, while writing a similar kind of literature in the West—David Mitchell’s novels would be a good example—is assumed to be an entirely different phenomenon. This is ironic: for a long time, it had been mostly Western literature that circulated globally, but nobody rushed to vilify it as literature that seeks to cater to foreign tastes. The only two British authors who Tim Parks mentions in a direct connection with his discussion of how literature changes when it is written for foreign consumption are the Japanese-born Kazuo Ishiguro and the British Indian Salman Rushdie.³² Other authors writing in English who are often presented as writers of the new global novel are virtually never white British or US-American: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie is Nigerian, Jhumpa Lahiri is Bengali American, Eleanor Catton is from New Zealand.

In an almost uncanny repetition of Jameson’s gesture in “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” Adam Kirsch wrote in 2017: “It is surely true that the fiction which is most successful around the world, in terms of sheer numbers, is more culture-industry product than work of art: think of the thrillers of Stieg Larsson” —and went on to argue that the situation is different when we look at “serious literary fiction with an international scope and audience”;³³ his examples of the latter include Murakami and Pamuk. In his attempt to elevate the critical stature of Murakami and Pamuk, then, Kirsch makes sure to carefully distinguish them from what he considers to be lowbrow literature: “culture industry” rather than “works of art,”

30 Fredric Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” *Social Text* 15 (1986): 65.

31 For a critique of Jameson’s claim, see Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory,’” *Social Text* 17 (1987): 3–25.

32 Parks, “The Dull New Global Novel.”

33 Adam Kirsch, “In Defence of the Global Novel,” *Financial Times*, April 7, 2017, <https://www.ft.com/content/553d6288-1958-11e7-9c35-0dd2cb31823a>, accessed August 5, 2017.

literary fiction that isn't "serious," and specifically—just as in Jameson's article written three decades earlier—*not* detective fiction. On the surface, then, Kirsch argues against Parks, but in fact tacitly shares his assumption that there is a clear-cut distinction between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" literature. What they disagree on is where the boundary between the two lies, which shows that the supposed distinction is nothing but clear-cut.

A lot is being written nowadays about global novels, but what these discussions often lack is a sense of context and history, a recognition that although some coordinates of these debates are undoubtedly contingent on our specific moment in history, there are constants, too. In an attempt to provide a sense of institutional and historical context for all this, then, I now turn to two interrelated questions that arguably fuel the discussions of "the dull new global novel." The first is: What is world literature? And the second is: What is good literature?

A good starting point for unravelling these critical conundrums is the link that a number of critics have made between the popularity of contemporary literature produced and consumed all over the world—"the dull new global novel"—with the rise of a new theoretical orientation in literary studies, world literature, over the last two decades.³⁴ These critics effectively argue that the kind of literature promoted by world literature, with its emphasis on the global circulation of individual texts and generic forms, as well as the racial diversification of the canon, amounts to nothing but "the dull new global novel." It has been suggested that the practitioners of world literature end up promoting the academic study of these texts, pushing the hitherto canonical masterpieces of European literature out of the research agenda and university curricula. This is not a sound argument because the research being done in the framework of world literature studies is in fact more often than not concerned with the literature of the past rather than the present, and a frequent practice in the teaching of world literature is to analyze a canonical work and its afterlife in connection with lesser-known texts.³⁵ This, of course, gives rise to another strand of criticism aimed at world literature studies, which I will now briefly discuss because it, too, touches the same problems that bother the critics of the new global novel.

The goal of world literature is to correct the biases with regard to the selection of texts deemed to be worth studying. Comparative literature has traditionally focussed on a relatively stable corpus of sanctioned masterpieces of ancient Greek, Latin, British, French, and German literatures. Postcolonial criticism has widened this corpus to include literatures written in the colonial languages, mainly English and French, in the

34 For foundational texts in modern world literature studies, which has been defined in relation, or even in opposition, to two older theoretical formations—comparative literature and postcolonial criticism—and an account of the origin of this concept, usually associated with Goethe's idea of "Weltliteratur," see: Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature"; Vilashini Cooppan, "World Literature and Global Theory: Comparative Literature for the New Millenium," *symplōke* 9 (2001): 15–43; Franco Moretti, "More Conjectures," *New Left Review* 20 (2003): 73–81; Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*; Theo D'Haen, César Domínguez, and Mads Rosendahl Thomsen, eds., *World Literature: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013); David Damrosch, ed., *World Literature in Theory* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2014); Theo D'Haen, David Damrosch, and Djelal Kadir, eds., *The Routledge Companion to World Literature* (Now York: Routledge, 2014).

35 See Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature"; Cooppan, "World Literature and Global Theory"; and Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*

former colonies, such as India and various African countries. The texts chosen for study testify to the experience of colonization and its aftermath as a force influencing their thematic and stylistic shape. World literature calls for a further diversification of the field of literary studies in that it seeks to transgress these traditional comparative configurations and create an intellectual space in which all kinds of literary products from all over the world are within the scope of study.

This undoubtedly utopian vision faces a number of obstacles.³⁶ First, to conceive of a category that has such a broad scope as world literature, it is necessary to occupy a privileged position from which a broad view is possible and which bestows authority on the observer. These claims are, of course, true with regard to any broad theoretical category, but given that the aim of world literature is to counter the biases that have made most of the world's literature almost invisible, the fact that this very theory is formulated by American scholars at American universities becomes deeply problematic. Indeed, the theory of world literature can be seen an essentially American category, "constructed from the perspective of a hegemonic power, which admits representatives on the terms that it establishes in order to compose and compare."³⁷ This gives rise to potential biases in the selection and interpretation of literary works, which are particularly problematic given the universalistic ideals behind world literature.

Second, world literature presupposes that on a certain level, all literary texts are created equal so that they can be grouped together in one conceptual category. This idealistic postulate, however, tends to obscure how the world of literature actually functions. Only a fraction of what is written around the world gets translated and enters the global literary market and, even if it does get translated, it is usually only into a handful of languages. The global circulation of texts depends to a great extent on conditions that have nothing to do with their aesthetic qualities, but rather with political and economic power.

This issue is related to the fact that the framework of world literature studies makes it dangerously easy to gloss over the facts of linguistic and cultural translation. The very idea that one can freely access texts from all around the world, conveniently selected, translated, and anthologized in one hefty tome, obscures the real complexities of the subject: the acquisition of foreign languages, the study of the cultural context out of which any given text grows, the intricate history of its transmission and afterlife.

Lastly, the project of world literature seems at times uncomfortably essentializing. If an anthology of world literature includes one text from a particular culture, it is very hard to resist the impression that this text is supposed to somehow represent that culture. By making the literature of the world more accessible and digestible, world literature might paradoxically strip it of the diversity and complexity that it seeks to promote. And, perhaps even more paradoxically, organizing anthologies by nations

36 For various critiques and corrections to mainstream world literature studies, see: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*; Shu-mei Shih, "Global Literature and the Technologies of Recognition," *PMLA* 119 (2004): 16–30; Chad W. Post, *The Three Percent Problem* (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2011); Emily Apter, *Against World Literature*; Sowon S. Park, "The Adaptive Comparative," *Comparative Critical Studies* 12 (2015): 183–96; Sowon S. Park, "An Unknown Masterpiece: On Pak Kyongni's *Land* and World Literature," *European Review* 23 (2015): 426–38.

37 Culler, "Whither Comparative Literature," 94.

further strengthens the “nation-and-narration” paradigm that any type of comparative endeavor actually sets out to question. The way that most world literature anthologies are organized creates the impression that national literary traditions are discrete entities rather than a system of communicating vessels.

The crucial question is whether these obstacles can in principle be overcome. The proponents of world literature—David Damrosch, Franco Moretti, Rebecca Walkowitz, and others—believe that the discipline of world literature is viable, even if it requires adding a number of caveats to it. The starting point for any work of world literature criticism seems to be a cautionary sentence similar to the following one, taken from the first page of the introduction to a recent anthology of world literature theory edited by David Damrosch: “At once exhilarating and unsettling, the range and variety of literatures now in view raise serious questions of scale, of translation, and comprehension, and of persisting imbalances of economic and cultural power.”³⁸ The opponents of world literature studies—Gayatri Spivak and Emily Apter being the most prominent among them—argue that world literature is not viable on theoretical grounds, despite its careful formulation and some successful applications.

Even if one agrees with this critical view of world literature, it is hard not to take seriously the discipline’s call for diversification of the corpus traditionally researched by literary scholars. But given the vastness of the global textual output throughout history, the number of languages in which these texts were and are written, and the major differences between what counts as literature in various cultures and in various periods, it is impossible for any one person to have even a cursory knowledge of world literature. Both in institutional and scholarly practice, this means that we keep falling back on a narrow range of national corpuses and the linguistic expertise associated with them. As a distinct mode of inquiry, world literature can be envisaged as a sum or synthesis of these distinct parts, for instance in the form of Franco Moretti’s distant reading, which tracks the global development of literary forms.³⁹ Moretti’s approach, however, does not offer a way of close textual engagement with world literature outside of our narrow fields of expertise, which for most scholars remains the most valuable element of their work. Another proposal attempting to delineate the area of world literature, at the same time moving beyond the established canon of European masterpieces, is David Damrosch’s emphasis on the circulation of literature outside of its geographical and chronological point of origin.⁴⁰ This approach, however, does not challenge the linguistic, national, and cultural limitations of traditional literary study, either: it still requires deep familiarity with a given literary tradition. To have or acquire this kind of familiarity is, of course, valuable in itself, but the problem is that the whole education system tacitly works to privilege the traditionally prestigious areas of literary scholarship, such as European literature or ancient literatures.

The problem of scope thus persists in every theoretical formulation of world literature, and the call for diversification still remains an unattained ideal. Current debates about “the dull new global novel” respond to the same theoretical challenge that lies at the heart of world literature: how to deal with the unimaginable size and

38 Damrosch, *World Literature in Theory*, 1.

39 See Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature.”

40 See Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*

diversity of world literature and how to decide which parts of it are worth reading more than others? In the first part of this paper, I argued that the cultural hegemony argument against the global novel depends on the old distinction between “good” and “bad” literature. The attribution of literary value, however, is inextricably linked with political and social processes, and is therefore subject to various distorting biases. This casts doubt on the unreflective reliance on value judgments on which the cultural hegemony argument depends. It will be instructive to introduce a historical perspective on the contemporary critiques of “the dull new global novel” by looking at a case study that illustrates not only the general phenomenon that aesthetic value judgments are prone to biases, but also the specific biases that might underlie the recent critiques of the global novel.

According to eighteenth centuries’ worth of criticism, a good example of bad literature is Apuleius’s *Metamorphoses*. The only Latin novel transmitted in its entirety, it is also known as *Asinus aureus* (*The Golden Ass*) because it tells the story of a young man who wanted to learn magic and accidentally transformed himself into a donkey. The book had been frowned upon right until half a century ago: its “extravagant and decadent style, . . . frivolous and low-brow content, and . . . poor literary and narrative technique” were heavily disapproved of.⁴¹ Who was Apuleius, the author of this terrible pulp novel? A Numidian Berber from Madaurus, a city in present-day Algeria; during his lifetime, in the second century AD, however, Madaurus was a part of the Roman Empire. On the one hand, then, Apuleius was a Roman author who wrote in Latin and traveled extensively across the empire, including Athens, Rome, Alexandria, and Asia Minor. On the other hand, he had long been considered a marginal writer: an African whose Latin was far from that of Cicero, creating his most famous work in the unpopular form of prose fiction, the author of obscene and eccentric literature.

In the late 1960s, the perception of Apuleius started to change. Gradually, his style has come to be recognized as a prime example of linguistic creativity; a closer analysis of his subject matter has revealed Apuleius’s eye for intricacies of cultural hybridity, and his playful approach to literary conventions has been reinterpreted as an inventive response to the rigidity of classical Latin prose. This reevaluation of Apuleius’s work became possible when classical scholars started to pay more attention to those Greek and Latin authors who had been long considered marginal in a move that “coincided with the more general challenge to the literary canon in the ‘culture wars’ of the 1980s and early 1990s.”⁴² The reception history of *The Golden Ass* is one of the countless examples that show that the attribution of literary value is neither timeless and universal nor objective and neutral. Literary tastes change and vary, and are imbued with power and politics. Sometimes the denial of literary value takes place in the form of an outright prejudice, for example, when the African origin of a writer is cited as the reason for the inelegance of his prose—as has been the case with Apuleius, too.⁴³ More often than not, however, it happens in more insidious ways, for example, when a particular set of aesthetic conventions becomes so deeply associated with the cultural

41 Stephen Harrison, “Constructing Apuleius: The Emergence of a Literary Artist,” *Ancient Narrative* 2 (2002): 159.

42 Ibid., 160.

43 Ibid. 150–53.

power of the political center that it ends up being understood as inherently more sophisticated than the cultural production of the periphery. Cicero used to be revered both as an ideal statesman and an authority in the matters of prose writing; Apuleius's prose did not adhere to Ciceronian standards; thus, it was thought that his literature must have been of bad quality.⁴⁴

It has become commonplace by now that judgments about aesthetic value are considered prone to various biases and distortions,⁴⁵ and the pendulum of scholarly consensus seems to have moved away from Harold Bloom's insistence that "the aesthetic is . . . an individual rather than a societal concern"⁴⁶ to an agreement that it is in fact a mixture of the two and that focusing on one's own individual reading experience tends to obscure the extent to which political and social factors influence the attribution of literary value and, by extension, the construction of the literary canon. J. M. Coetzee captures precisely this tension in his text "What Is a Classic?," written as a response to T. S. Eliot's famous essay of the same title, when he discusses his reaction to hearing Bach's music as a teenager in South Africa: "Was the experience what I understood it to be—a disinterested and in a sense impersonal aesthetic experience"—or "was [I] symbolically electing high European culture, and command of the codes of that culture, as a route that would take me out of my class position in white South African society . . . ?"⁴⁷

The biases in the process of canon formation, a process that links the production of literature and the production of knowledge about literature, have been acknowledged—and yet many of them are still evident in the way we approach the study of literature. One of the most powerful of these biases, alongside class, gender, and race, is the Eurocentricity of the canon. The institutions that serve to uphold it—the university curricula according to which we study and teach, the anthologies and publication series, both literary and critical, that we compile, sell, and learn from—are largely produced in the West by Western scholars, critics, and publishers. Judging by the current institutional setup of literary studies, the old prejudice according to which Western literature is intrinsically superior to that of the rest of the world, has not changed much since Thomas Babington Macaulay infamously stated in 1835 in a memorandum on the subject of Indian Education that "a single shelf of a good European library is worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia."⁴⁸ If the books we choose to read and study are those that we assume to be most valuable, and they happen to be mostly European literature, then our choices must be based on implicit value judgments that are still akin to Macaulay's words, no matter how deeply aware we are of the problematic issues surrounding the process of value attribution.

44 Ibid., 147.

45 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984); Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Contingencies of Value," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983): 1–35; Richard Ohmann, "The Shaping of a Canon: U.S. Fiction, 1960–1975," *Critical Inquiry* 10 (1983): 199–223; John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

46 Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (London: Macmillan, 1995), 16.

47 J. M. Coetzee, "What Is a Classic? A Lecture," in J. M. Coetzee's *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986–1999* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001), 10–11; T. S. Eliot, "What Is a Classic?," in T. S. Eliot's *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 53–71.

48 Thomas Babington Macaulay, "Minute on Indian Education," http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html accessed March 15, 2016.

Apuleius’s case is a historical example that can serve to put the current discussions about the new global novel into perspective and relativize the aesthetic judgments voiced in these discussions. The example of *The Golden Ass* is especially instructive in this case for two reasons. First, it involves a non-Western author read by Western readers and critics; and second, Apuleius was also long thought to have trivialized Western literary conventions of his time. David Damrosch went so far as to link the reception of Apuleius with an early critique of world literature that in fact anticipated current debates about “the dull new global novel.”⁴⁹ Although those who nowadays participate in this debate might not be aware of it, a similarly pessimistic understanding of world literature was voiced already in the nineteenth century, when the term itself was still relatively new. In 1886, Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett—an Irish lawyer and economist with a keen interest in literature, which he taught at the University of Auckland in New Zealand—published *Comparative Literature*, the first book under this title ever written in English.⁵⁰ Drawing on his knowledge of ancient Greek, Roman, Hebrew, Arabic, Chinese, and Indian, as well as modern English, French, German, and Italian literatures, Posnett proposed a Darwinian approach to literary history, tracing the development from commonwealth- to clan- to city - to world- and finally to national-literature. He connected the emergence of “world-literature” with “the severance of literature from defined social groups,” or “the universalising of literature,” and an important part of his characterization of it was that it seeks to imitate earlier literary models.⁵¹ Posnett’s evolutionary account emphasized that when civilizations and empires expand, crumble, and finally break up, their cultural, literary, and linguistic traditions do so, too, and in consequence literature becomes decayed and confused.⁵² Damrosch pointed out that one of Posnett’s examples in this category could well have been Apuleius.⁵³ The critical reception of a text that is widely accepted as one of the first novels in the history of literature thus anticipates the current debates about the most recent development of this genre. It remains to be seen whether the critical reception of Haruki Murakami and other authors of “the dull new global novel” will one day turn around as well.

What an exciting time for a literary taxonomist: apparently, a new genre has been born, and it is taking over the world. To call it “the dull new global novel,” however, is to conflate two distinct lines of argument: a political perspective on the cultural consequences of globalization (“global”) and an aesthetic judgment about the literary qualities of the work in question (“dull”). The cultural hegemony argument against the new global novel treats this genre as problematic because it is a product of an objectionable mechanism whereby the cultural center dominates the peripheries, and “the local” is replaced by “the global.” This critique, however, relies on equating “the local” with stylistic sophistication and “the global” with a lack of stylistic refinement: in the critical idiom deployed in the discussions of the new global novel,

49 Damrosch, *World Literature in Theory*, 5–6.

50 Hutcheson Macaulay Posnett, *Comparative Literature* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1886). See E. S. Shaffer, “Editor’s Note: The ‘Scientific’ Pretensions of Comparative Literature,” *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook*, 2 (1980): xi.

51 Posnett, *Comparative Literature*, 236.

52 *Ibid.*, 237–38.

53 Damrosch, *World Literature in Theory*, 5–6.

“global” and “dull” become synonymous; or, in other words, “global” becomes the new “lowbrow.” This means that the cultural hegemony argument applied to the new global novel in fact masks a concern about literary value—an uneasiness about popular literature—and about the diversification of the canon—an uneasiness toward non-Western literary production. The theoretical backdrop for my argument has been the program of world literature, with its call for the diversification of the corpus for literary study and the way in which it intersects with the issues involved in the attribution of literary value. The debate about “the dull new global novel” thus brings together two fundamental theoretical issues: the viability of a universalistic approach to literature and the reliability of value judgments in view of their manifest fallibility.