

Book Review

The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century

Adam Kirsch, New York: Columbia Global Reports, 2016, pp.105.¹

Adam Kirsch's book on the global novel is an example of the recent trend of academic responses to the increased influence of globalization on literary writing. Kirsch places his discussion within the context of a revived interest in "world literature", a concept originally proposed by Goethe at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Seeing poetry as the universal possession of mankind, Goethe envisioned an epoch in which national perspectives in literature would lose their prominence, thereby giving way to more universal approaches. Kirsch perceives the global novel as a postmillennial form of world literature that now represents "the most important means by which literature attempts to reckon with humanity as such". The six chapters of *The Global Novel* together serve as an attempt to delineate a definition of the new trend in literary writing through a discussion of a number of well-known novels by Orhan Pamuk, Haruki Murakami, Roberto Bolaño, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Mohsin Hamid, Margaret Atwood, Michel Houellebecq, and Elena Ferrante.

In the first chapter, "World Literature and its Discontents", Kirsch provides an overview of academic and journalistic responses to the global novel, creating a framework for his own analyses of the selected sample of representative works. Kirsch's summary of critical voices suggests that postmillennial globalised literature does not fit easily into more traditional understandings of world literature as a body of canonical works of high aesthetic quality with a unique ability to represent the universal human condition that transcends a particular place or time. Contemporary world literature is more typically associated with works that have attracted a vast international readership, but which have also provoked impassioned negative responses. Referring to Emily Apter's *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability*, Minae Mizumuras's *The Fall of Language in the Age of English* and Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*, Kirsch addresses the common charges made against globalised literature, including the most serious criticism – its complicity in the destructive influence of the global market on national cultures. By turning "foreignness into a literary commodity" the global novel is perceived by its critics as offering pre-established images of national and ethnic cultural specifics that are adjusted to the taste of the global reader. Instead of offering "the possibility of any true encounter with difference" that is often lost in the process of translation into images which are more easily packaged in the global marketplace, the global novel thus contributes to the spread of a monoculture. This monoculture is associated not only with the imperialism of the English language and the Anglophone West that forces authors who desire global recognition to abandon the "provincial time scale of most national literatures", but also with the decline of aesthetic quality in literature and of the proliferation of mediocrity in the literary market.

The "World Lite" editorial in *n+1* magazine, Michael Lind's article "World Books: Two Theories of World Literature" and Tim Park's "The Dull New Global Novel" are quoted by Kirsch as examples of the most hostile criticism that sees contemporary world literature as a product of global capitalism that is distributed through corrupt international institutions such as the Frankfurt Book Fair, multinational publishing conglomerates or the Nobel Prize for Literature. Some critics go so far as to accuse internationally successful authors of abandoning allusions to the more untranslatable specifics of their own cultures, thereby

making them complicit in the standardisation and simplification of the linguistic and aesthetic tools of globalised literature. Noting that the global novel is the target of attacks from both radicals and cultural conservatives, Kirsch identifies in these critical voices as, respectively, a nostalgia for “the union of modernist aesthetics and radical politics” and a yearning for the “global classicism” that would produce “a genuine world literature far more erudite and refined than global popular culture”.

Structuring his book as a reply to these critical voices, Kirsch maps the defining elements of the global novel and provides a positive criticism of the genre, aligning it with global consciousness and cosmopolitanism. Working with a miscellaneous selection of internationally renowned authors (“Nothing unites them, perhaps, except contemporaneity and the shared status of being ‘global’ novelists”), he sets himself the difficult task of reaching a definition of the global novel that would offer something more substantial than that of works with the capacity to attract a global readership. While failing to identify any common formal qualities in the selected novels, Kirsch focuses on a discussion of their thematic concerns, the dominance of the global perspective (“The local gains dignity, and significance, [only] insofar as it can be seen as part of a worldwide phenomenon”) and their frequently pessimistic images of “violence, alienation and reckless exploitation”.

In the remaining five chapters Kirsch examines novels by writers whom, he claims, are generally perceived as leading figures in the pantheon of world literature. Representing voices from different corners of the world, works such as Pamuk’s *Snow*, Murakami’s *1Q84*, Bolaño’s *2666*, Adichie’s *Americanah*, Hamid’s *The Reluctant*, Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, Houellebecq’s *The Possibility of an Island* and Ferrante’s “Neapolitan Novels” present the reader with sufficient evidence to prove that global fiction is truly an international phenomenon. Far from seeing their authors as victims of globalisation, Kirsch praises these novelists as active explorers of a world system who remain acutely aware of the effect of this system on everyday lives. The discussion of each novel is taken as an opportunity to address, refute but sometimes also admit the relevance of hostile critics’ charges against the global novel. Pamuk’s *Snow*, for example, is given as an example of global fiction that has acquired an international readership despite its use of specific untranslatable aspects of local culture both in terms of linguistic (puns) and of the thematic levels of the novel. On the other hand, the East/West political, cultural and religious conflicts that Pamuk places at the centre of his narrative are taken as an opportunity to dissociate world literature from certain forms of universalism since, in Kirsch’s reading, these conflicts are associated with the “hope that the novel itself might be a genre that encompasses these divisions, not by transcending them in the name of universal art, but allowing all point of views to express themselves”.

The problem of universality also comes to the forefront in the discussion of Murakami’s *1Q84*, the massive international popularity of which has been matched by an equally substantial critical reaction from the Japanese literary establishment which sees in Murakami’s work the negative influence of Americanization. *1Q84*’s combination of local and cosmic perspectives has resulted, in Kirsch’s opinion, in an ideal text for confronting the suggestion that universality in contemporary world literature is equivalent to “the manipulation of a set of conventions and references” which have been “drilled into us by the global cultural industry” and which are thus universally understandable. While conceding that Murakami’s book cannot escape the charge of the oversimplification of literary language (its style is plain, impoverished, marked by repetition and redundancy, and its characters are one-dimensional), Kirsch nonetheless suggests that this very style in fact serves to support Murakami’s diagnosis of modern life as isolated, emotionally impoverished, and devoid of

the complexity of social relations. Murakami's novel undoubtedly presents a certain lack of complexity that contributes to its linguistic and cultural translatability, but it also presents an example of how the local may be treated in the global novel. Although he saturates his book with details from a specific location, Tokyo, Murakami also implicitly denies the significance of this location through his vision of modern life-styles as "contentedly rootless." While Kirsch perceives the novel's world-wide popularity as evidence that Murakami's treatment of the local may offer an insight into "the way we live now", others may question the extent to which this rootlessness is promoted by the novel.

In the chapter that deals with examples of "migrant literature" (*Americanah* and *The Reluctant*) Kirsch returns to the issue of Americanization and its influence on the global novel. Kirsch finds similar criticisms of the West and the association of globalisation with the economic and cultural dominance of the First World, primarily of America, in Adichie's and Hamid's novels. Although the protagonists of these works profit personally from their encounters with American society, they both return to their native countries recognizing that their individual success cannot overshadow the suffering of the Third World victims of globalisation. In their presentation of characters whose migrant experience leads to "the creation of a global political consciousness" *Americanah* and *The Reluctant* have the potential to develop the global consciousness of their readers, a capacity of the global novel that Kirsch finds most praiseworthy.

The last two parts of *The Global Novel* are devoted to examples of internationally renowned fiction produced by the authors from the West. The penultimate chapter draws the reader's attention to the remarkable similarities between Atwood's and Houellebecq's dystopic narratives in which explorations of human sexual relations play a major role. However, although these works share, among other things, the same critical judgements on humanity as such, Kirsch perceives their apparent universality as problematic. The fact that both novels align the global apocalypse with the "ailments of rich Western societies" may be perceived, as Kirsch admits, as a form of cultural imperialism – "an imperialism of imagination". Taking the practices of late capitalism as the major causes for the destruction of society and nature, Atwood's and Houellebecq's global novels have in fact little to say about the less developed parts of the world. Kirsch thus identifies in these examples an interesting paradox of the global novel, in that instead of presenting a truly global experience, they end up creating a mirror image of culture which, in a form of colonialism, associates the universal with its own specific features. Another interesting query that Kirsch does not pursue further in his discussion would be the question of why these essentially western portrayals of global apocalypse have gained the attention of an international readership from other parts of the world. Are they attractive as a kind of warning about the (western) ways that should be avoided, or are these novels instead marketable as representatives of a popular global culture that often thrives on images of destruction, violence and explicit sexuality?

In the concluding section of his book Kirsch turns his attention to Elena Ferrante's "Neapolitan novels" which in many respects represent, in his opinion, the very opposite of what the critics of world literature decry: they are "not thinly generic but richly particular; not international in scope but localized on the scale of a single neighbourhood, not about isolated individuals travelling in a featureless world but about a thick web of social and economic relations that determine the course of individual lives". Focusing on a single neighbourhood with a highly specific linguistic, ethnic and regional culture, Ferrante's novels seem to offer that which so many global novels appear to lack: an emphasis on the significance of the local within the globalised world. But this deep localisation of the protagonists' and, by extension,

also the readers' experience of human life is seen by Kirsch as a form of intensification of the message about the effect of the global on individual lives. The similarities that he identifies in Ferrante's narratives' and the thematic concerns of the contemporary global novel, however, connects her novels even more strongly with the old tradition of world literature that aimed to capture the universality of human experiences which transcends specific historical, cultural and socio-political situations. Indeed, one can claim that the awareness that individual lives cannot escape the influence of the wider world belongs among the most universal forms of human experience, and that the images of human destinies as products of "the dialectic of the local and the global" have been represented in world literature throughout the centuries.

On the whole, Kirsch's *The Global Novel* offers an interesting insight into a contemporary literary phenomenon that deserves the attention of both academic and lay readers. What can be seen as a certain weakness in these thought-provoking discussions of the major works by internationally renowned authors is, however, the lack of a broader perspective. Kirsch does not examine the "global novel" in its broader historical and literary contexts and, although he relates his discussions to Goethe's idea of "world literature", he does not work with the critical voices that have developed its diachronic explorations (for example, the works of David Damrosch, Franco Moretti or Mario Siskind). A discussion of contemporary global fiction in the context of Moretti's and Siskind's claims that the novel was already participating in the discourse of globalization produced by the hegemonic West as early as the nineteenth century (if not earlier) could have thrown a clearer light on how the selected works illustrate the decline or persistence of this hegemony in the twenty-first century. While the gloomy images of western lifestyles depicted by the authors from the "centre" (Atwood and Houellebecq) and the critical attacks on the West from the voices of the "margins" (Pamuk, Adichie or Hamid) would suggest the former, the continued dependence of globally accepted novelists on the western literary tradition (seen in the allusions from classic Western literature in *Snow*, the signs of Americanization in *1Q84* or the appropriation of the classic novel of manners in *Americanah*) would seem to suggest the latter. The interpretation of the global novel that Kirsch presents in his book thus raises further questions and opens the field for further discussions about a genre that captures the zeitgeist of our time.

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