



Globalization and Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

This essay provides an overview of recent debates over economic globalization and explores globalization's effects on and implications for contemporary literature. The era of globalization is typically defined as a time in which the sovereignty of nation states has declined and modes of exchange operate with increasing ease and speed across national boundaries, producing configurations of power that exceed the boundaries of the nation-state. It is said to have been "born" with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent end of the Cold War. But this essay also considers ways in which globalization is linked to the broader history of modernity and to the inequalities produced and reproduced in capitalism and colonialism. It further suggests that globalization's impact on literature is manifold, with both positive and negative associations. The publishing industry has itself become more globalized (and consolidated into multinational media conglomerates), but the World Wide Web simultaneously allows ever greater access to literary texts. Meanwhile, the themes of hybridity and multi-rootedness – in part, expressions of the subjective experience of globalization – are increasingly prevalent in literary texts. The essay concludes by exploring the question of how globalization might be shaping new literary forms, and suggests that contemporary literary theory and criticism must distinguish globalization from postmodernism.

... It is life englobed.
One would like to stick one's hand
Out of the globe, but its dimension,
What carries it, will not allow it.

John Ashbery's 1975 poem "Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror," an excerpt from which appears above, describes a tiny, exquisite sixteenth-century Italian mannerist painting by Francesco Mazzola (known as Parmigianino), in which the artist is pictured as he appears to himself in a distorting, convex mirror: hand looming large, watery eyes behind, studio receding into background. The "globe" in these lines refers to the mirror that holds the image of Parmigianino in place, from whose confines, the speaker of the poem suggests, he wants to flee. Yet in the excerpted passage and throughout the poem, Ashbery renders this specific predicament

of “global” placement more general, for it is not only Parmigianino but also the speaker, and we readers, whose lives, under self-reflection, are “englobed”: we may want to escape our globalized predicament, but the globe’s very dimension “will not allow it.”

Ashbery, who dislikes being referred to as a “postmodern” poet, would probably especially resent having his lyrically sublime poem used as an entryway into a discussion of “globalization” and contemporary literature. Yet, for my purposes, “Self-Portrait” exposes problems for literary and critical theory that are still emerging, and as such have not yet adequately been addressed, concerning how literature responds to globalization, and, as the poem itself asks, how globalization alters conceptions of the individual subject. To be sure, these questions are not entirely dissimilar to those formulated under the rubric of “postmodernism,” most famously (and usefully) characterized by Fredric Jameson in 1984 as expressing the “cultural logic” of “late” – which is to say global – capitalism. His view, derived largely from the early Georg Lukács and Frankfurt School thinkers Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, is that economic consolidation and the worldwide spread of consumerism is leading to the instrumentalization of subjectivity and a virtual annihilation of will. But much has happened, in literature, theory, economics, and politics, in the more than two decades since Ashbery and Jameson published their most influential texts, and the extent to which the vocabulary of “post”-ness and reification applies in what is increasingly being called a new “age of empire” is worth reconsidering.

The era of globalization is generally viewed by economists and social scientists to have emerged after 1989, with the fall of the Berlin Wall (and, subsequently, in 1991, the Soviet Union) and the rise, in the 1990s, of the United States as lone remaining superpower. It is typically defined as a period in which the sovereignty of nation states has declined, and modes of exchange – of money, technology, products, and people – operate with increasing ease and speed across national boundaries, producing configurations of power that exceed the boundaries of the nation state. There are divergent opinions about whether this situation constitutes global hegemony (a homogenized monoculture dominated by the US military, the mass media and the US-led IMF and World Bank), which is the position that Jameson himself, even in his recent writings, upholds, or whether it opens the possibility, with the radically increased speed of information flow, for new kinds of cultural production and political resistance – the optimistic (if sometimes excessively idealistic-seeming) position of such theorists as Michael Hardt and Tony Negri. Of course, it is not necessary to choose between these extremes in order to recognize the common ground they share: the sheer fact of globalization and its impact, potential and already realized, on all spheres of life.

If globalization was indeed “born” in 1989, it would be necessary to admit that its gestation period lasted hundreds, if not thousands, of years.

Undoubtedly, globalization is intimately connected to the phenomenon of modernity, and, as with modernity, one could view not just the last two or three centuries, but indeed the entire history of the world as a process of globalization, an approach toward a globe-ness that is ever on the verge of expressing itself, a spatial analogue to modernity's temporal orientation. Even if we acknowledge the postmodern critique of the "modern" narrative of progress and self-identical subjectivity, and consequently view globalization as a decidedly "contemporary" phenomenon distinct from aspects of modernity, it would be necessary to acknowledge that the global didn't suddenly spring up *ex nihilo*. Indeed, such mainstream proponents of globalization as *New York Times* journalist Thomas Friedman have recognized that the events of the mid-twentieth century (hot and cold wars among them) displaced an earlier period of rapid globalization in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. What Friedman does not say is that the earlier phase of globalization, so closely tied to the rhetoric of modernization, was driven largely by colonialism and imperialism. And many critics of globalization charge that in its current phase, globalization embodies those residually exploitative forms, not displacing them so much as continuing them.

The term "globalization" itself emerged in the 1950s, during the onset of the cold war and of many "third world" national liberation struggles, both of which the current era of globalization has supposedly superseded. The noun "globe" derives from the Latin *globus*, which simply means the shape of a sphere; but the adjective "global" denotes "universal," an antonym to "specific" or "local." In the political genealogy of this term, then, it can easily be seen how "globalization" was initially perceived in opposition to local, national forms of sovereignty. The counterargument offered by globalization's advocates is that such a process need not be viewed as a threat, but might in fact be welcomed by the "developing" world – even if globalization theory expressly problematizes the modern, teleological rhetoric of development – and need not preclude or obscure local expressions of cultural difference.

If this brief description of political and economic globalization is helpful in providing a sense of the parameters of the discussion, what remains to be explored is how the predicament and/or possibility of globalization relates to literature. It is simple enough to conceive how globalization has affected the *business* of literature – its "production" in the commercial sense. The last fifteen years have seen a remarkable consolidation of the publishing industry, with multinational conglomerates (e.g. AOL-Time Warner, Viacom, News Corp, Pearson) acquiring controlling stakes in formerly family-owned literary publishing houses. (Alfred A. Knopf, for example, is part of Random House, which is owned by the German media giant Bertelsmann.) At the same time, the expansion of the World Wide Web (and online booksellers such as amazon.com) has allowed for an exponential extension of the reach of literature, exposing buyers in

remote areas of the world to an ever wider range of texts, while also increasingly putting local bookshops, with their owners' sometimes idiosyncratic affinities, out of business. It is still unclear whether this new situation (increased consolidation and increased reach) will entail a genuinely multidirectional flow of ideas around the world or rather that books, like other "luxury" goods, will move largely from the United States and Europe to the developing world, while the labor that goes into book production is itself outsourced. In any case, glancing back at the last fifteen years, the contemporary books that literature students in US and UK universities tend to read come from a significantly wider geographical area than formerly, even if those books are largely written by a handful of Western-educated Anglophone authors.

Meanwhile, globalization as a *theme* of contemporary literature is, not surprisingly, pervasive. In his 1989 novel, *The Satanic Verses*, the crisis around the publication of which most clearly if jarringly announced the emergence of global concerns in the literary sphere, Salman Rushdie, the Indian-born writer who now lives in New York, has his half-mad character Gibreel Farishta sing a little patriotic ditty: "O, my shoes are Japanese / These trousers English, if you please / On my head, red Russian hat – / My heart's Indian for all that." This is to say, if we recognize the allegorical inflections in Gibreel's tune, that even before its recent whole-hearted embrace of economic globalization, India was already politically and culturally intimately linked to the outside "modern" world, yet also maintained a recognizably separate, local identity. To take a more recent example (although one surely influenced by Rushdie's own), Jeffrey Eugenides, in his novel *Middlesex* (2002), which concerns a hermaphrodite raised in Detroit whose grandparents were Greeks from Turkey, but who himself now lives in reunified Berlin, rather facetiously explains (through his narrator) how globalization in fashion makes discerning ethnic distinctions ever more difficult: "You used to be able to tell a person's nationality by the face. Immigration ended that. Next you discerned nationality via the footwear. Globalization ended that. Those Finnish seal puppies, those German flounders – you don't see them much anymore. Only Nikes, on Basque, on Dutch, on Siberian feet."

With footwear so with literature itself? Perhaps. In any case, the more complex question that remains is what globalization has to do with the very form(s) of contemporary literature. Just as Proust, Kafka, Joyce, Woolf, Eliot, and Beckett expressed a state of the ("modern") world in the very shapes of their sentences or poetic lines, maximal or minimal, thereby pressing against the frontiers of knowledge and historical and geographic memory, the contemporary era's most powerful, path-breaking literary writers – W. G. Sebald, J. M. Coetzee, and Ben Okri among them – shun the low-affect irony associated with postmodernism, conveying the import of globalization as both multilateral ethical conundrum and horizon of promise. By exploring the limits of self-reflection and creating new

forms of expression, these writers challenge a new generation of literary and cultural critics to find fresh, more piercing ways to picture “life englobed.”

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