

Realities, Utopias, and Misconceptions Concerning the Globalisation of Literary Studies

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Arjun Appadurai's categories of "grassroots globalisation" ("optical challenge," area studies, and research on globalisation) are applied to recent comparative literary studies: Pascale Casanova's La république mondiale des lettres, Gayatri Spivak's Death of a Discipline, and Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature".

Keywords: comparative literature studies / globalization / Casanova, Pascale / Spivak, Gayatri / Moretti, Franco

Using Arjun Appadurai's article "Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination" I wish to consider several (mis)conceptions concerning the theoretisation of globalised literary studies.

Appadurai envisages a "grassroots globalization" or "globalization from below" that secures a "democratic and autonomous standing" of local communities in the face of global economic and political powers. "International civil society" will have a chance only if efforts to globalise from below are successful (3).

Appadurai discusses three dimensions of globalisation: 1) "the peculiar *optical challenge* posed by the global," 2) Area Studies, and 3) research on globalisation. The first refers to the need to see apparently stable formations, such as the nation state, as configurations in constant flux. The second aspect refers to the need to reconceptualise *Area Studies* in accordance with the changed economic, political and cultural conditions (8). The rethinking of *research* in a globalised world raises, for Appadurai, fundamental questions about the Western research tradition: "Can we retain the methodological rigor of modern social sciences while restoring some of the prestige and energy of earlier visions of scholarship in which moral and political concerns were central?" (15)

Appadurai is concerned with challenges to the social sciences, but we can use his categories to ask in what ways literary theory has (or has not)

responded to the challenges of globalisation. Hence my paper will take up Appadurai's three concerns, setting them one by one against three recent and relevant studies in Comparative Literature, namely: Pascale Casanova's *La république mondiale des lettres* (1999; English trans. 2004), Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* (2003), and Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000).

The "Optical Challenge"

In the 1950s and 1960s, when "modernization theory" dominated (4), theory and method were seen, according to Appadurai, "as naturally metropolitan, modern, and Western" (4-5). The rest of the world served as empirical material "for the production or revision of theory" (5). Research in those decades "had no special interest in problems of voice, perspective or location" (5).

Interestingly, Appadurai sees then the "optical challenge" to this "muscular objectivism" in terms of narrative concepts introduced in literary theory and analysis. Within that older social-science discourse, the identity of the speaker-researcher was irrelevant; the location from which he (not he/she) spoke, and the focalisation of the text did not matter. The standards of Western academia determined the perspectives and values of the researchers, whatever their race, gender, and other markers.

As we know, that solid edifice started to crumble in the following decades. It remains an interesting question to what extent the problematisation of voice, perspective, and location in the social sciences (for instance in the work of Clifford Geertz or Johannes Fabian) was furthered by literary texts and criticisms that emerged already in Modernism. The question all too easily engenders delusions of grandeur in literati, and hence I leave it at that.

In literary studies, the need to "change optics" is perhaps most evident in the writing of literary histories. European integration, globalisation, and the devastations of chauvinism have made traditional national literary histories obsolete, and it seems hardly possible to adopt their methods for the construction of global, or even just European, literary histories. The vastness of the empirical material resists emplotments. Better to focus on a specific aspect. In this, if hardly anything else, I agree with Franco Moretti, who remarks that "the larger the geographical space one wants to study, the smaller should the unit of analysis be: a concept [...] a device, a trope, a limited narrative unit – something like this (61). I add as a caveat that one should resist the temptation of encyclopedism.

Pascale Casanova's *La république mondiale des lettres* is an attempt to write a global literary history in terms of economic metaphors. The modern republic of letters is, according to her, a ceaseless struggle between national languages and literatures. Her economic, rather than martial, metaphor establishes an analogy with the view that most social scientists (including Appadurai) have of capitalism. Literature evolves by means of struggles to replace a hegemonic culture with great national "literary capital" with the hegemony of another. Classical French was superseded by what Casanova calls a German "Herderian Revolution," while the dominance of German literature and culture has by now been superseded by the literature of dominant world language, English.

What does globalisation imply for the nation states? Appadurai sees globalisation "as a definite marker of a new crisis for the sovereignty of nation-states" (4), for states are now frequently confronted with "floating populations, transnational politics within national borders, and mobile configurations of technology and expertise" (5). "Grassroots globalization" would mean an additional threat to the state from below. In Casanova's scheme of things, globalisation of literature also produces a swerve away from nationalism, but the meaning of this is radically different. In accordance with other recent studies (including my own literary history of East-Central Europe), she postulates an interdependence, even an "organic bond," between the emergence of modern states and the emergence of vernacular languages with their new national literatures" (35). More precisely, the foundation of sovereign nation states puts literatures in a subservient position. Casanova sees in Joyce, Nabokov, Beckett, Danilo Kiš, and others a revolt against the dominance of nationalism in literature and the emergence of a trans-national or global writing: "great writers have managed, by gradually detaching themselves from historical and literary forces, to invent their literary freedom, which is to say the conditions of the autonomy of their work" (xiii). If economic globalisation threatens the sovereignty of nation states, this aids what Casanova calls the "conditions of autonomy" for literary production. But note that her literary elite has nothing to do with Appadurai's "grassroots." Indeed, Appadurai's political/economic scheme is tripartite (grassroots, nation, transnational organisation), whereas Casanova's literary one is binary (national vs. autonomous). Whether literature can really emancipate itself from the increasing hegemony of economics in a globalised world is beyond the horizon of Casanova's book.

Comparative Literature and Area Studies

Gayatri Spivak's *Death of a Discipline* is, among other things, a plea for a rapprochement between Comparative Literature and Area Studies. Notwithstanding her misleading title, Spivak seeks the revitalization of a discipline, whose Western metropolitan orientation has led to a dismissal of what she calls "global Southern Hemisphere." She does not try to globalise literary history to rectify myopic views of the past, for she has only marginal interests in literary history, and none in a global one. Instead, she advocates a close reading of texts in general, and specifically of those that were written in the vernacular languages of that Southern hemisphere. Inasmuch as this focus foregrounds the uniqueness of individual texts, rather than national or global perspectives, Spivak may be said to cultivate literary "grassroots."

Reading in this sense is not primarily comparative; it is, rather, trans-cultural, inasmuch as the reader does not usually belong to the culture in which the text functions. Spivak adamantly, and to a certain degree quite justifiably, demands, therefore, that trans-cultural and trans-national readers acquire a subtle command of the vernacular language of the text. To those who regard this demand as impractical, she replies that it was unquestionably accepted in traditional, i.e. Eurocentric, Comparative Literature. Her objections to the use of translated texts in Cultural Studies and World Literature courses are, in my view, well taken, inasmuch as they pertain to professional training. But she ignores the need of general readers and students. For them, a properly guided reading of translations is better than none at all.

Spivak's vision of local cultures and literatures brings together Comparative Literature and Area Studies. A prerequisite would be, of course, to liberate both from the hegemonic political and economic interests that led in the US to their Title VI funding in the 1960s as a result of the "Sputnik Effect" (104), and to their renewed funding after 9/11 2001. Beyond the question of funding looms the larger issue of orientation. As Spivak writes: "It would work to make the traditional linguistic sophistication of Comparative Literature supplement Area Studies (and history, anthropology, political theory, and sociology) by approaching the language of the other not only as a 'field' language" (9). A point well taken. The reality is, however, that even Appadurai's article ignores the *language* question altogether, which is particularly puzzling since working with the "grassroots" necessitates knowing their vernacular. I would not put much faith in the so-called 'transnational advocacy networks' (TANs) if their members could only communicate in the hegemonic idiom of English.

I have suggested that Spivak's vernacular texts from the Southern hemisphere are the literary equivalent of Appadurai's "grassroots." But, as I see it, for Spivak the modality of reading is more important than the textuality of the text, and we should understand this preference in the context of metropolitan concerns, more specifically US debates. Spivak resists the pressure to functionalise texts reductively, whether in the service of postcolonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-globalist ideologies, or to support globalisation itself:

literary studies must take the "figure" as its [sic] guide. The meaning of the figure is undecidable, and yet we must attempt to dis-figure it, read the logic of the metaphor. We know that the figure can and will be literalized in yet other ways. All round us is the clamor for the rational destruction of the figure, the demand for not clarity but immediate comprehensibility by the ideological average. (71)

To read the literature of the Southern hemisphere in terms of this eminently "literary" conception is immensely attractive, especially since it involves a respect based on a subtle knowledge of the text's language and cultural conditions. And Spivak may well be right that studying and teaching literature today is justified by this mode of reading, not by a mere familiarisation of students and the public with translated foreign texts.

Yet problems abound. The objection that a future Comparative Literature cannot focus on hardly available texts and esoteric languages, may not be the most important one. Beyond this pragmatic question looms a more general one, namely whether the Derridian and postmodern notion that literature is a figure of "undecidability" is not itself an ideology, a questionable generalisation that emerged not from the literary culture of the Southern hemisphere but from metropolitan cultures. Willy-nilly, Spivak advocates a thoroughly modern/postmodern manner of reading to her fellow metropolitan scholars. And this reading can be imparted to young scholars in the Southern hemisphere only by bringing them into the orbit of a metropolitan university. Spivak's respect for the text is complicit with the kind of globalisation she resolutely rejects.

One may sympathise with the position that Spivak adopts within US academia, but one would like to see it contextualised also within the literary culture of the Southern hemisphere. Her essay does not give serious attention to methods and theories emerging from the Southern hemisphere, only occasional references to essays that are critical of metropolitan literary cultures, such as Achebe's famous essay on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. In Spivak's approach, the notion of text is restricted to fiction, belles lettres; texts on theory, philosophy, and methodology are excluded.

Are these the blind-spots of a humanist? Appadurai, for one, at least broaches the subject by asking whether metropolitan social scientists

could “learn from colleagues in other national and cultural settings whose work is not characterized by a sharp line between social scientific and humanistic styles of inquiry” (15). Could pre-scientific approaches at the grassroots effect, then, the way science is practiced at the metropolitan research centers? Appadurai raises the question but leaves it at that: “In the end, the elements I have identified as belonging to our research ethic may well emerge from this dialogue all the more robust for having been exposed to a critical internationalism” (16) – which I read as a refusal to entertain seriously the possibility that metropolitan standards may have to be changed drastically if we take the “grassroots” cultures seriously.

Both Appadurai and Spivak wish for a groundswell of resistance to resist “top down” powers, institutions, policies, and systems, but even a cursory look reveals that the true context of their ideas is metropolitan thinking.

Research

Appadurai’s third category, research, is informed, as I have indicated, by a Western philosophy of science, by a US and Western notion of what good research entails and how it can be measured: “Reliable new knowledge, in this dispensation, cannot come directly out of intuition, revelation, rumor or mimicry. It has to be a product of some sort of systematic procedure” (11). Is Appadurai a Popperian then? It all depends on the value we assign to the word “directly.” After all, Popper admitted “intuition, revelation, rumor or mimicry” as inspirations for the pursuits of knowledge, though he specified then the process of falsification as the only scientific method of verification. Appadurai may mean that such unscientific phenomena as revelation and rumor may *indirectly* become knowledge – but I am not quite sure. In any case, it must be obvious that Appadurai’s globalising process of constructing and verifying knowledge is just what Spivak opposes with her insistence on the singularity of literary texts. The outcome of her reading is not knowledge but “undecidability” – unless we declare the sum of endless exercises in undecidable readings to be a form of knowledge.

However, Spivak’s Derridian approach to texts (better: to reading) is not the dominant literary current. Let us not be over-hasty in aligning literary theory with multi-focal perspectivism, ambiguity, and undecidability. Let us remember instead that, as Gerard Genette noted in the preface to his *Nouveau discours du récit* (1983), narratology was an arrogant “pilot science” of literary studies. Genette responded that if all knowledge was to be located between the rigor of mechanics and the eclectic empiricism of stamp collecting, literary studies of his day were oscillating between the

philately of interpretive criticism and the mechanics of narratology that distinguished itself by respecting the mechanism of texts (8).

After the quasi-scientific wave of structuralism, and the deconstructive answers to it, Genette's rhetoric sounds slightly dated, but the issue remains unresolved. Is narratology not, after all, an objectivist Western theory that claims to be applicable to any narrative anywhere? Stories from Africa, the South Seas, or China may deal with myriads of local figures, problems, and contexts, but narrative theory is global for it claims to accommodate all narrative modalities. Can there be any narrative anywhere that is not written in the first, second, or third person? Narrative theory, like digitalization, may be a universal structure.

This brings me to Franco Moretti's "Conjectures on World Literature," which also focuses on narratives, though to their complex history rather than to their structure. Can there be a law for the novel's history? Moretti's affirmative response proposes the following conjecture on literary evolution:

In cultures that belong to the periphery of the literary system (which means: almost all cultures, inside and outside Europe) the modern novel first arises not as an autonomous development but as a compromise between a western formal influence (usually French or English) and local materials. (58)

Intrigued by a remark of Fredric Jameson on Japanese literature, Moretti read some twenty books on the origin of the novel in various countries (Jonathan Arac notes in his article "Anglo-Globalism?" that eighteen out of those twenty were in English). The agreement of these independently written histories convinced Moretti that in this case we can talk about a law.

Moretti agrees with Casanova, and the world-system school of economic history, that world literature is one system of unequal components (55 f); like Casanova, he believes that "economic metaphors have been subterraneously at work in literary history" (56). In contrast to Spivak, he believes that a global approach to literature and literary history requires "distant" rather than close reading (56-57); the result will be inevitably synoptic and reductive, "a patchwork of other people's research" (57).

The question is whether these great sacrifices in thorough reading, which I regret as much as Spivak and Arac, will lead to a reliable "global" model. No! What Moretti traces globally is merely the novel. It would be impossible to track in a similar way the spread of Western poetry and drama, for their ancient forms in all parts of the world have not been squeezed out by unique European forms. Furthermore, Moretti traces not novel in general, only the spread of a particular Western narrative form he

calls the modern novel, and its spread to non-Western cultures was not, as he claims, simply an encounter of a “Western formal influence” with “local materials”; the local, Appadurai’s grassroots, always already possessed also indigenous narrative *forms*.

Instead of contesting Moretti’s other empirical and historical observations, let us ask about the key issue – viz. whether this putative law asserts anything significant in a scientifically reliable manner. Boiled down to its elements, the “law” asserts an absolutely banal intuition, namely that cultural goods get modified to various degrees as they enter into foreign cultures. This truism is neither a nomothetic statement, nor a scientific one open to falsification.

My conclusions are short, skeptical, and perhaps disappointing. Casanova and Moretti propose mechanisms for the functioning of a world system of literature. Spivak resolutely focuses on the individual reader. I am skeptical of the systems and would be more sympathetic to Spivak’s focus on readers if she did not systematically label all texts as undecidable.

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Dejstva, utopije in napačne predstave o globalizaciji literarnih študij

Ključne besede: primerjalna literarna veda / globalizacija / Casanova, Pascale / Spivak, Gayatri / Moretti, Franco

Arjun Appadurai v članku »Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination« predstavi tri razsežnosti globalizacije: 1) »izziv zornega kota, ki ga predstavlja globalizacija«, 2) področne (arealne) študije in 3) raziskovanje globalizacije. Te tri kategorije sem uporabil pri preučevanju treh novejših razprav o globalizaciji v primerjalni književnosti; to so: *La république mondiale des lettres* (1999) Pascale Casanova, *Death of a Discipline* (2003) Gayatri Spivak in »Conjectures on World Literature« (2000) Franca Morettija.

Sprememba zornega kota je v literarnih študijah potrebna zaradi rekonceptualizacije literarne zgodovine. Morettijeva zgodovina romana je korak h globalizaciji, vendar njegovo »odmaknjeno« branje ne upošteva »temeljnega« (grassroots) zornega kota in ohranja zahodnega. Spodbijano stališče Casanovove, ki pravi, da zmorejo veliki avtorji za svoja dela ustvariti avtonomen položaj (XIII), se oddaljuje od nacionalne perspektive, vendar podpira besedila, ki bi nemara težko našla »temeljne« bralce. Spivakova zagovarja natančno branje zlasti tistih besedil, ki so nastala na južni polobli. Rekli bi lahko, da goji literarno »temeljnost«, vendar je njeno stališče, da je literatura podoba »nedoločljivosti«, že samo po sebi teoretska globalizacija, ki izhaja iz velemestnih kultur, – potemtakem je avtorica vpletena v globalizacijo, ki jo odločno odklanja. Ali se je sam Appadurai resno pripravljeno odpovedati »velemestnim« načinom raziskovanja in teoretiziranja, je samo na sebi vprašljivo.

Casanovova in Moretti opisujeta mehanizme v domnevnem svetovnem literarnem sistemu, medtem ko se Spivakova osredotoča na posameznega bralca. Tistim, ki so do sistemov skeptični, bi bil lahko bolj privlačen pristop Spivakove, če le ne bi vseh besedil sistematično označevala za nedoločljiva.

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