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# World Literature, the Canon, and the Case of Saramago

Duncan McColl Chesney

## ABSTRACT

The article revisits some key recent work about world literature, especially Rebecca Walkowitz's *Born Translated* (2015), to assess the criteria for inclusion in a current, synchronic World Literature canon. Contrasting the global novel, the cosmopolitan novel, and works rooted in more local or national traditions, whether realist or modernist, the article questions the values at play in contemporary canonization, especially as revealed in the pedagogy of David Damrosch. In an attempt to situate José Saramago, the similar cases of various authors are reviewed, including J. M. Coetzee and António Lobo Antunes. Drawing on some criticism of world literature from postcolonial discourse and from comparative literature, I propose caution for critics and teachers in assuming, in our global era, that we have left behind the older national traditions and canons. While we cannot and should not abandon the project of World Literature, we need to be more critical of its on-going development as a discipline and its practical formation of a canon.

**KEYWORDS** world literature, canonization, David Damrosch, Rebecca Walkowitz, José Saramago

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*Ex-position*, Issue No. 47, June 2022 | National Taiwan University  
DOI: 10.6153/EXP.202206\_(47).0009

**Duncan McColl CHESNEY**, Professor, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, National Taiwan University, Taiwan

*There is something dangerous in the courting of world fame and world literature.*

--Georg Brandes, "World Literature"

**Ex-position**  
June  
2022

## Introduction

This essay starts from a simple question: Is the Nobel Prize a viable instrument of contemporary canonization for World Literature? Is, for instance, Nobel laureate José Saramago (1998), a world writer? Do the winners of the Nobel literature prize, at least in recent years, comprise a reasonable addition to the canon of World Literature? Not *only* the prize winners—the famous excluded classic modernists like Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Virginia Woolf, Jorge Luis Borges are well known. But do the winners since World War II belong in an extension of “the canon”?<sup>1</sup> And if not, why not, and who does? This is by no means an essay about the Nobel Prize (for which, see English, ch. 5); rather, I seek to question the criteria of evaluation and canonization in the era of World Literature, among which the Nobel is just one element. In this essay, I will review some of the key debates around World Literature in order to pose the question of whether the guiding criteria for the establishment of a diachronic canon of World Literature have applicability in the contemporary, synchronic world literary system, and what other criteria are involved in consecration. I will then turn briefly to the case of Nobel laureate José Saramago to explore this process of canonization. I will argue for caution in moving too quickly to a notion of the *global* novel in the canonization of synchronic World Literature. This is not meant to be an essay *against world literature* (Apter) so much as a review of some salient criticism of the discipline in hopes of more balanced practice of assessment and pedagogy.

## Walkowitz and *il romanzo mondo*

The critical literature on World Literature is by now becoming unmanageably vast, and I cannot hope to survey it completely here, but I want to look into some of the claims about contemporary world literature to see how to situate Sarama-

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<sup>1</sup> As Alexander Beecroft has warned, “One useful way of thinking about the Nobel Prize might be to imagine it not so much as a device for establishing a canon of world literature but rather as a means of establishing a European canon, to which occasional non-European works can be admitted, with the specific task of augmenting the role of the European periphery within the European literary system” (Beecroft, *Ecology* 258).

go. One important intervention, after the successful rise in the past twenty years of World Literature as a more or less historical field for undergraduate teaching, canonized in the famous anthologies (Damrosch et al; Puchner et al; Davis et al.), is the book by Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in the Age of World Literature*. Walkowitz has emerged as a key figure at the overlap between Modernist Studies and World Literature, so I would like to start out by paying close attention to some of her main claims.

Against certain skeptics like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Emily Apter, the World Literature teachers and anthologizers like David Damrosch have of course depended heavily on translation, and thus translations and translation studies have been central to the development of World Literature as a discipline or field. Famously, Damrosch even claimed that world literature “encompass[es] all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language” (*What* 4), arguing later that “works become world literature when they gain on balance in translation, stylistic losses offset by an expansion in depth as they increase their range . . .” (289). In this context, Walkowitz is certainly right to note that translation has always been a part of literature and is not specific to our particular historical moment (2). But widespread translation and dissemination of new works has certainly intensified in recent years along with the development of a global market for literature. As examples of this extreme Walkowitz cites two very different authors, J. K. Rowling and her Harry Potter books, and J. M. Coetzee and his most recent novels (since his Nobel canonization—and the move to Australia). Walkowitz notes that a recent novel by Coetzee (*Childhood of Jesus*, 2013) was available in Dutch translation even before its release in English, thus connecting it with the worldwide release and distribution of some of the later Harry Potter books.<sup>2</sup> From this similarity Walkowitz speaks of books “written for translation from the start” and notes, apparently positively, an “opportunistic approach” (3) to the global market by these and other contemporary writers. Naturally the publishers of best sellers or of major prize winners are going to look to maximal distribution of their authors—this is a state of the global market and the industry of publication, and certainly not *necessarily* a function of the writer’s style. Is this global market situation of contemporary fiction really leading to radical stylistic and other changes in fiction itself?

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<sup>2</sup> Mads Rosendahl Thomsen notes the same phenomenon around Harry Potter, citing works by Salman Rushdie, Don DeLillo, Paul Auster, and García Márquez (9). Are these also “born-translated” authors?

Walkowitz speaks of books “written as translations” (4), but technically this is not true of the Coetzee. Just because a Dutch edition was published at the same time or even earlier does not mean the book was “written as a translation” in the fashion of Samuel Beckett or Nancy Huston. But Walkowitz’s point is clear: what we are dealing with is books written with an eye to easy and rapid translatability. Indeed, as Walkowitz notes, in *Childhood of Jesus* supposedly everyone speaks Spanish, which would then be “translated” into the English (or Dutch) of the text, and thus the very issue of translation is thematized in the book. This is, on the one hand, merely an old conceit from the novelistic tradition, e.g., *Don Quijote*—it is just a conceit for reasons of disavowal, and thus in this instance as something like a post-modern pastiche of that conceit. In this respect, it seems to me that Walkowitz overstates her case. On the other hand, *Childhood* does indeed depict a sort of post-natal, hispanophone quasi-Utopia, and clearly *dépayement* and language (and *Don Quijote!*) are real issues for the novel. It is just not clear that Coetzee so easily fits the “born translated” trend Walkowitz discusses.<sup>3</sup>

It must be said that Coetzee has in fact been working recently with Spanish—*The Death of Jesus* (2019) was published first in Argentina as *La muerte de Jesús* and only subsequently in Austria in English—and has been active at the Universidad Nacional de San Martín in Buenos Aires through the Cátedra Coetzee and the “Literaturas del Sur” initiative as he tries to make connections in the “Global South” outside of the grasp of Anglo-American-European publishers and critics.<sup>4</sup> This is a very interesting development but suggests a somewhat different motive from success in Global or World Literature on the part of the Nobel laureate. It is not that Coetzee wants to “block” (Walkowitz 6) a given native reader, or the very idea of one; rather, he aims for a specific reader in the Global South against the institutions and venues of the Global North that govern over publishing—and World Literature.

In the programmatic introduction to her book, Walkowitz surveys a number of texts and a number of characteristics under the general idea of “born translated.” In fact, by the term “translation” she refers much less to the traditional idea of a finite text in one language approximated and reproduced in another than to a general condition of cultural hybridity and polyvocality in the context both of production and reception—applicable to virtually any text within condi-

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<sup>3</sup> Admittedly Vittorio Coletti also speaks of Coetzee in this respect as great example of the *Romanzo mondo*. See Coletti 67.

<sup>4</sup> Certain of Coetzee’s books, notably *Siete cuentos morales* (2018), have been published (in translation) only in Spanish edition.

tions of post-modern globalization and cultural heterogeneity. She singles out Coetzee as a prime exemplar of such a phenomenon not just because his recent books have been published in translation prior to the “original” (which they thereby place in a secondary relationship), on the way to rapid global translation into dozens of languages, but they also thematize translation, “provincialize” English, and cast into doubt the very notion of a nationally-situated implied reader. This is certainly one possible reading of Coetzee—which Walkowitz pursues at length in the chapter “Close Reading at a Distance.” I do not have space here for a detailed engagement with that reading (and the rather metaphorical use of the notion of “translation”)—one in which I would want to show a different logic for some of Coetzee’s stylistic moves in his European Modernist inheritance (Franz Kafka, Beckett) and his negative relationship to a Lukácsian realism dominant in the (South) African novel of his youth, rather than in his self-positioning within emergent World Literature. Rather, I want to continue briefly to explore Walkowitz’s general position in hopes of better assessing the contemporary phenomenon of World Literature.

In further discussing her idea of “born translated,” Walkowitz speaks of “the effects of circulation on production” (6)—meaning global markets and audiences changing the way writers write by, among other things, changing the intended readers of their works, notably from some circumscribed national linguistic community to some international audience without a shared language or tradition. Thus, to make books more easily readable/translatable, writers engage in “preemptive translation”; the books thus have no “native” reader. This is surely not a good thing, or not necessarily so: no specific intended audience, no community, no situatedness. Walkowitz celebrates novelists she thinks make a virtue of this situation, since this represents, among other things, an un-illusioned realism about the contemporary global literary market. An interesting idea, which leads me to ask: Was Saramago, starting with *Blindness*, such a writer?

It is true that at times in literary history the written language and the spoken language of the writer have been different, and thus the living community and the intended readerly community are different. Late Medieval and Renaissance European writers writing in Latin; Japanese and Korean literati writing in Chinese; indeed, where- and when-ever there is a split between a classical, “cosmopolitan” (*per* Beecroft) tradition and a vernacular, lived language situation—a situation not uncommon historically. Then there is the more recent example of the great moderns like Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov, of exile and displacement of the twentieth century which continues to the present. The contemporary examples of language-switching migrants are many and growing: for example, Elif

Shafak and the switch from Turkish to English; Yoko Tawada switching from Japanese to German; Yiyun Li in her abandonment of Chinese for English; Xiaolu Guo, Aleksandar Hemon, and many other migrants (especially if we count writers who never actually publish in their mother tongues but start out as writers in a second or third language, like Conrad). In this context Walkowitz mentions the phenomenon of actual self-translation with famous examples like Beckett, Milan Kundera, and Ngūgī wa Thiong'o, to which she adds Bernardo Atxaga and Nancy Huston.<sup>5</sup>

A related and vexed issue is changing one's own prose to anticipate (English) translation, a sort of pre-writing in translation that has been identified in such writers as Haruki Murakami and Orhan Pamuk. This has been discussed by Vittorio Coletti (ch. 1) as de-localizing (which he links to the potential "standardization" bemoaned by Erich Auerbach in 1952 [257]): for example, Roberto Bolaño or Orhan Pamuk.<sup>6</sup> Cormac McCarthy and Coetzee are mentioned as different cases of de-localization, obviously related as a world stylistic phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> An elephant in the room in this discussion is the current global dominance of the English language as attested by the UNESCO Index Translationum. English is the top translated-from language by far (and also the fourth top translated-into language).<sup>8</sup> The most lucrative market for books is in English, and getting translated into English is a sign of prestige as well as a pathway to international prizes, book events, and so forth, in addition to income for many world writers.<sup>9</sup> So clearly the market pressure on writers is to write in English or get into English as quickly as possible if they want to succeed as (world) writers (or, for writers like McCarthy and Coetzee, to write in a simplified English that can easily travel the world, in or out of translation).

This phenomenon is anticipated (as in the case of Bolaño) in books in any "world language": English, French, Portuguese,<sup>10</sup> Spanish, Arabic, Chinese for

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<sup>5</sup> This migrancy and language-switching is not simply a function of exile, but also involves "opportunism"—Walkowitz suggests in a note that Jonathan Littell wrote the *Bienveillantes* to be able to sell books and win prizes (e.g., the Goncourt), which would be possible in French but not in English. In this he does and does not follow in footsteps of Beckett (or Kundera). Do we want to think of Beckett's "opportunism" in switching to French to escape his mastery of English and thereby escape James Joyce? I guess you could call it that, but he certainly did not do so to win a Nobel Prize!

<sup>6</sup> The Pamuk example would then be somewhat like Saramago: early works with a local audience in mind, later works more global in intention.

<sup>7</sup> See Tim Parks (193) on this phenomenon in Italian.

<sup>8</sup> According to Graham Huggan, World Literature is a field dominated by "the rule of English and the assumption of translatability" (497).

<sup>9</sup> "In the literary system as it is construed at the moment, the English language is so dominant . . . that the condition of global success is success in either Great Britain or the USA" (Thomsen 29).

<sup>10</sup> The recent Portuguese anthology by Buescu et al. is fascinating in how it "permite questionar o que se

global audiences, with some degree of de-localization. Walkowitz contrasts this phenomenon with an older sense of “language conferring belonging” (21). She thinks we need a new understanding of literature’s place: “the concept of literary belonging may have outlived its usefulness” (24). Hence, her celebration of contemporary writers who seem to be moving on from that earlier understanding of literature. Having brought up the earlier model, Walkowitz mentions imagined communities and “possessive collectivism” (24), the Romantic-nationalist idea(1) of works as the embodiment of national spirit or genius—which Walkowitz criticizes as involving a vicious circle (works are valuable in how they depict the putatively national community which exists by virtue of the works that describe it, etc.). In any case, our notions of originality, art, and the nation are in many ways contemporary and interrelated. The nation grew as the idea of art (esp. the novel) developed (e.g., Walter Scott) as evidence of the nation itself. It follows that in a post-national epoch, we can do without this myth of art/literature. Thus, art is understood here by Walkowitz as *not* essentially communal, despite national language and (constructed) traditions. This is a very post-modern, individualist notion of art/literature which is, to say the least, debatable. Certainly the celebrated nineteenth-century realist novel with its aesthetic of thick realism and its complex vocabularies and references that link to a very specific place and language *is* local and aimed at a specific community—or national (if elite) market, if you will—and serving a national purpose (*mutatis mutandis* in the belated context of de-colonization and the later regime of nationalist realism). How do things change when these national circumstances no longer obtain?

Walkowitz continues, “Whereas world literature once referred to a group of ‘works,’ it now refers to a ‘network,’ a ‘system,’ or a ‘problem’” (29)—a note then cites Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova, Damrosch, and Martin Puchner. Certainly Damrosch (like Puchner) has in mind a “canon” of canons, a collection of World Classics that we should all read, even if he nuances this idea with his notions of translation and the idea of world literature as a “mode of reading,” rather than a set canon, in “a detached engagement with a world beyond our own” (*What Is* 297). Zhang Longxi’s point remains valid for the question, however: “Because there are far too many books to read, we cannot afford but to read the very best of the world’s numerous literary works, and the only way to know what are the

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intende por ‘mesma lingua’” (“allows one to question what is meant by ‘same language’”; 31). The anthology also confirms Jérôme David’s sense that “la ‘littérature modiale’ varie donc en fonction de notre culture nationale, de notre époque et du ‘point stratégique’ que l’on retient” (“‘world literature’ thus varies according to our national culture, our era, and the ‘strategic point’ [Ansatzpunkt] we take as a way in”; 108). My translations.

best books is to depend on critics and scholars of the world's different literary traditions to tell us about their canonical works, and to convince us why they are worth reading" (122). Thus, (diachronic) world literature, as it has developed in recent years, is something like a (super-)canon of canons. The question, then, is the contemporary field rather than the "classics." What are the criteria and institutions for the construction of the contemporary canon of world literature?

Walkowitz claims that literature now "no longer conforms to the logic of national representation" (30)—well, this is indeed the question. Some literature does not, but some literature does. What Walkowitz seems to be ignoring is the fact that a work that intends a national audience gets its "logic" from the community and the national tradition (problematic as these are) whereas a new global novel gets its audience from a perceived world market and its institutions like prestige prizes. De-localizing is differentiating (some) contemporary literature from precisely the cultural function of literature as conceived in the "golden" age of national literatures in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Westphalian literary world system or Anglo-French centered world republic of letters of the Enlightenment, Romantic, and high bourgeois eras (Casanova).<sup>11</sup> The issue very specifically relates to the discipline of World Literature. Walkowitz's position: "when world literature seems to be a container for various national literatures, it privileges *source*: distinct geographies, countable languages, individual genius, designated readers, and the principle of possessive collectivism. When world literature seems instead to be a series of emerging works, not a product but a process, it privileges *target*: the analysis of convergences and divergences across literary histories" (30; emphasis added). Though she does not present it as such, this sounds roughly like the distinction I want to draw here between diachronic and synchronic world literature in questioning not so much the former as the latter.

Since she focuses so much on translation and translatability, Walkowitz naturally must address the issue of "Untranslatables." She questions the celebration of the untranslatable (Apter; Lennon), which can perhaps be a tedious ideal of some contemporary American fiction, or the very unusual sort of thing Brian Lennon celebrates in cases like that of Christine Brooke-Rose, which is a very specific

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<sup>11</sup> "La forza internazionale dei grandi scrittori otto e novecenteschi, fino agli anni Sessanta-Settanta, è direttamente proporzionale al loro radicamento nazionale o regionale, alla loro fedeltà geopolitica, alla loro dipendenza da una tradizione letteraria o culturale indigena, alla loro capacità di rappresentare una terra, una società, una cultura" ("The international strength of the great nineteenth and twentieth century writers, up to the sixties and seventies, is directly proportional to their national or regional roots, to their geopolitical fidelity, to their dependence on an indigenous literary or cultural tradition, to their ability to represent a land, a society, a culture"; Coletti 33). My translation.

phenomenon: post-war, post-modern experimental cosmopolitan avant-garde writing, for a very elite audience indeed (along the lines of *Finnegans Wake*). For one thing, this raises the question of the on-going influence of (global) Modernism, an interesting topic itself (Huyssen; Thomsen; Lazarus). But what about the “untranslatable” work that is just saturated in its local community (e.g., Patrick Chamoiseau, Lobo Antunes)? Not some contrarian, virile American or post-modern game, this is national art in an important, critical sense: not simply *affirming* literary belonging, but critically reassessing the history and tradition of a specific people. Damrosch had posited that national literature does not translate well (“literature stays within its national or regional tradition when it usually loses in translation . . .” [289]), while world literature gains in the process, so perhaps this is precisely the difference: António Lobo Antunes would be, on that model, simply Portuguese and *not* World Literature—and would presumably remain so even if he finally were to win the Nobel Prize.

In sum, Walkowitz has a very post-modern, global, cosmopolitan individualist conception of literature (novels) and readers. She thinks of tradition and nation solely in terms of belonging and exclusion, prestige and power. What she seems to neglect are works that speak (typically in a complicated, saturated realist or experimentally modernist language) directly to a national history, and thus speak critically to a specific people (an *intended* reader). Works like those of Chamoiseau or Lobo Antunes (or Junot Diaz, whom Walkowitz mentions) indeed pose problems for translation because they are serving a critical *national* (or at least *communal*) function. Walkowitz is too quick to write off the collective function of literature and to accept the mediation of the global market and the prestige prizes for isolated individuals. She therefore misreads certain writers (like Coetzee) to fit them within her market-individualist model.

### Damrosch and World Literature

Walkowitz’s position thus relates interestingly to Damrosch’s and thus goes to the heart of World Literature as a discipline.<sup>12</sup> The focus on the (international, cosmopolitan) reader and on reception (market) very much changes the sense of world literature itself. Damrosch has been in many ways the central figure in the emergence of World Literature as a discipline, and has famously focused critical attention of the circulation and transplantation of individual texts, as well

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<sup>12</sup> As Parks writes, “individualism and globalization go hand in glove. The idea that we are absolutely free of any community permits us to engage with all people everywhere” (179).

as on (superficial) thematic rather than historical connections between texts from different times and regions. “A work,” he writes in *What is World Literature?*, “only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actually present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture. . . . All works cease to be the exclusive products of their original culture once they are translated” (4, 22). Damrosch’s peculiar stances have been subject to important critiques (especially coming from postcolonial studies). Sarah Brouillette notes how “Damrosch’s own project of insisting that every literary work is unique, and that every act of consumption of a literary work is irreducible to any other, is highly compatible with contemporary capitalism’s fetish for particularity and diversity” (“World Literature” 94). As Graham Huggan has written, “Damrosch’s model of World Literature might be critically described as a form of applied transnational humanism that lessens the very cultural differences it insists upon by assimilating them into a loosely defined world system that assumes their cultural translatability to and for the West” (494). Meanwhile, the Warwick Research Collective describes Damrosch as “self-consciously indifferent to historicity” (50). Huggan continues, “[Damrosch’s] vision of intersecting worlds is neither historical nor anthropological; rather, it is an effect of the ‘worldliness’ of the *critic*, whose decisions on what counts or not as World Literature are motivated by a desire to promote a particular worldview inspired by the socially and culturally educative value of literary texts” (493). Regarding the worldliness of this very specific critic, like the notorious problem with Leo Spitzer, might we have with Damrosch a method with no applicability beyond the genius and idiosyncrasy of its originator?<sup>13</sup> Added to that the specific cultural-pedagogical situation of Damrosch as teacher and anthologizer for a very specific, monolingual American undergraduate audience, and the discipline of World Literature in this most influential guise seems problematic indeed.

Huggan has already criticized the overall phenomenon of World Literature in a version of the central postcolonial critique:<sup>14</sup> World Literature as a discipline

is global in ambition, but conspicuously excludes the majority of the world’s readers; it provides a stimulating encounter with cultural difference, but one all too readily translated into familiar terms; and it underestimates, almost to

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<sup>13</sup> And Damrosch certainly is a delightful and engaging teacher and speaker.

<sup>14</sup> See Mufti on world literature and “an expansionist bourgeois order encompassing the world” (243); what is needed is “a concept of world literature (and practices of teaching it) that work to reveal the ways in which diversity itself (national, religious, civilizational, continental) is a colonial and Orientalist problematic, one that emerges precisely on the plane of equivalence that is literature” (250).

the point of forgetting, the materiality of the literary among other forms of cultural production, celebrating cosmopolitan forms of consciousness without necessarily acknowledging the global inequalities that drive them—and that drive the predominantly liberal-humanist project of World Literature itself. (490)

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In a somewhat different fashion, Spivak early on positioned herself against World Literature and for language learning and historical-contextual grounding. She is opposed to reliance on translation because of her focus on the specificity of idiom and the difficult work of close reading—facts perforce ignored by Damrosch and his anthologies in translation. In an exchange with Spivak at the 2011 ACLA annual meeting, Damrosch recognized “that the study of world literature can very readily become culturally deracinated, philologically bankrupt, and ideologically complicit with the worst tendencies of global capitalism” (Spivak and Damrosch 365). For her part, Spivak in response granted that “one should really try to proceed with what one has rather than try to be as good as one can be in a single literature” (374). Both Damrosch and Spivak are noted, if opportunistic (!), language learners, and in this exchange the former colleagues collegially find common ground, but the fact remains that Spivak represents those who question the very need for, as well as possibility of, World Literature,<sup>15</sup> while Damrosch is a standard-bearer of the discipline.

## **A Fundamental Problem**

World Literature came to be conceived in the American university as a sort of canon of canons, the greatest hits of a number of well-established national traditions brought together in a single course or anthology to speak to a new generation of students and readers in rapidly globalizing, shrinking world. This form of canonicity is disavowed by major practitioners like Damrosch. In *What Is World Literature?* Damrosch writes that world literature is “*not a set canon of texts but a mode of reading, a detached engagement with a world beyond our own*” (297), but he later qualifies this, noting the persistence of a hyper-canon along with a counter-canon and a shadow canon involved in a complicated dialectic (2018, 45). While critics like Damrosch speak of a *mode* of reading (or Moretti of a

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<sup>15</sup> Harald Weinrich asks, “Zu welchem Zweck brauchen wir überhaupt eine Weltliteratur, wenn außer Frage steht, daß “Welt” in der Literatur weit besser intensional als extensional zur Geltung kommt?” (“Why exactly do we need World Literature when unquestionably it is better to understand the world in literature *intensionally* rather than *extensionally*?”; 225). My translation.

problem for research), pedagogically speaking a canon necessarily forms (e.g., via anthologies). However, as Marshall Brown writes, “Anthology makers necessarily have to treat world literature as an exceptional canon. It’s an exclusive club whose members exceed even the very stiff requirements for joining a major national canon. In this construction world becomes a quality judgment” (360). This is world literature in the “value formulation,” according to Brown, to be contrasted with world literature in the “situation formulation,” his terms for the contemporary global dispensation and literature that responds to it. “World literature in the value formulation belongs to the colonial or imperial world, whereas world literature in the situation formulation belongs to the postcolonial world” (361). Again, this is not the same, but similar to the diachrony-synchrony distinction I want to make.

While individual additions to or subtractions from the “value” canon could be debated, in principle the idea itself made perfect sense and the experts of each tradition were the obvious people to turn to help make decisions—with a given audience in mind: generalist, primarily monolingual, primarily American (highly privileged) undergraduates. As I have suggested, the problem is fitting this complicated and debatable but ultimately manageable diachrony with the contemporary state of the literary system. How do we decide what new or recent books will fit into the World Literature canon, or how does the phenomenon of World Literature conceived as such change the very criteria of canonization (speaking of canonization not as a Bloomian ideal but as an unavoidable pragmatic fact of teaching)? If Walkowitz is right about literature in the era of World Literature programs and anthologies (and critical discourse) being decreasingly local and situated, that is, World Literature as *Global Literature*, then the traditional criteria of national canonization obviously no longer obtain. If reference back to a particular tradition in a particular language and communication to a particular (national) community no longer determine literary production or literary value, what does?

Zhang insists: “World literature is not and cannot be the conglomeration of books that happen to circulate widely in the international book market, not books on the bestselling list promoted by publishers or media for commercial profit or ideological interest. World literature is the integrated body of canonical works of the world’s literary traditions” (123). He would thus leave canonical additions precisely to national/area experts and *not* to some rootless cosmopolitan world literature teachers, much less the best-seller lists and big prize short lists. Or as Tim Parks bluntly puts it, “In the publishing culture we have today, any idea that a process of slow sifting might produce a credible canon such as

those we inherited from the distant past is nonsense. Whatever in the future masquerades as a canon for our own time will largely be the result of good marketing, self-promotion, and pure chance” (114). In 2011, from a defensive Comparative Literature position, Haun Saussy cautions, speaking of the danger in world literature of *platitude*:

The idea that “world literature” is a canon of the universally recognized works of genius to which every literate person must respond with admiration—the idea of world literature as a status to which writers or works should aspire—is an echo of such institutions as the Nobel Prize, school reading lists, and anthologies. Were such institutions to gain, through the promotion of World Literature, an even greater influence over the reading of literature than they do today, writers who presently find themselves classed as non-canonical, unrecognized, avant-garde or incomprehensible would have even less chance of being read, and so a vital source of diversity and discovery in literature would be choked off. The “literariness” of literature resides, at any given moment, more in the non-canonical body of writing than in the canon. To the degree that the canon benefits from extraliterary social support, it is no longer dependent on readers. (289-90)

In this respect, Theo D’haen reminds us that the emergent super-canon cannot be merely “the juxtaposition of all the world’s literatures’ self-evaluations” (32), but involves a triage at every step according to major/minor criteria, and the resulting canon will thus inevitably miss any number of important works (whatever the criteria of importance). Indeed, as Saussy continues, “there is no such thing as a single World Literature, but rather always different local appropriations of the literature of the world, each instance being framed and energized by the particular conditions, possibilities, desires and fears of its place and time” (291).

In the current climate, we are at risk of distorting this canon. Apter has dismissively spoken of a collection of “unfrayed [Spivak], prize-friendly, translation-happy World Lit success stories” (Apter, *Zone* 103), as well as the “drive toward a transnationally translatable monoculture” (99). Even Damrosch, usually so capacious and positive, warns of “writers who consciously write world literature” (*How to Read* 135) and “a superficial international style” (159)<sup>16</sup>—though Damrosch calculatedly eschews naming names and speaks rather of writers who

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<sup>16</sup> In *What?* He has already mentioned “a notional ‘global literature’ that might be read solely in airline terminals, unaffected by any specific context whatsoever” (25).

“negotiate creatively” the current situation (159). Indeed, it would perhaps be churlish to name names—and world literature scholars seem to disdain Tim Parks among other reasons because he dares to do so. In any case, Parks explicitly understands the phenomenon as a global impoverishment increasingly common not just to “airplane” literature. Apter speaks of a growing equivalence and substitutability (*Against 2*)—again, back to Auerbach’s standardization.

In this context, Parks rightfully questions the immense and growing importance of international literary prizes which are not for local talent or community (27): the IMPAC (International Dublin Literary Award), the International Booker prize, the Premio Mondello, the International Literature Award, etc., and of course the Nobel. What does it mean to have prizes, and thus prestige and consecration, in the hands of juries who are precisely not local, not reading and judging with respect to national and regional traditions (and probably not reading in the original)? As James English writes, “to honor and recognize local cultural achievement from a declaredly global point of vantage is inevitably to impose external interference on local systems of cultural value” (298)—and also in turn to put pressure on the local prizes themselves (305) that supposedly work according to different values. Problematic as this phenomenon is, English shows exactly how much prizes are integral to the current literary system, just as important as the anthologies (26). Are these prizes inordinately influencing (and helping create) contemporary world literature as *global* literature?

A number of critics have thus come to ask why we teachers and scholars must believe in the idea of World Literature at all (as a discipline, as a research field). There is currently an interrelated world system economically (late or neo-liberal capitalism) and even culturally to a certain extent (e.g., Moretti, Casanova), but perhaps this fact is not adequately explanatory in the case of the phenomenon of literature (or *wenxue* or *adabiya* or whatever tradition). Perhaps World Literature is, as Huggan, Saussy, Apter, Spivak, Weinrich, and others suggest, not a very helpful way to think about *literature* (and derives its popularity—and funding—for other, problematic reasons). As Spivak has written, “Globalization takes place only in capital and data; everything else is damage control. . . . I don’t believe the humanities can be global. I think our task is to supplement the uniformization necessary for globalization. We must therefore learn to think of ourselves as the custodians of the world’s wealth of languages [and literatures], not as impresarios of a multicultural circus in English” (“Translating” 36).

On the other hand, we should not be too quick to write off the idea of World Literature itself, or prominent versions of it, in the name of some naïve or purist conception. Pieter Vermeulen proposes “training a critical eye on the ways con-

temporary writing engages the demands of the market and the aspirations of world literature” (Helgesson and Vermeulen 80), and insists that “literary studies in the age of market saturation need to find ways to describe literature’s engagement with—rather than celebrate its illusory disengagement from—the market” (Helgesson and Vermeulen 82). The current situation of a world literary market is a fact (as Walkowitz acknowledges), and there is no point in pretending that this is not the case or escaping into some (imagined) earlier state of affairs. Brouillette in the same volume is very critical of attempts by the likes of Apter or the staff of *n + 1* to criticize the world works celebrated by the market in favor of some more critical, resistant, political, or simply heterodox writing. The difference is trivial, to the sociologist of literature like Brouillette, given the fundamental mechanisms of power at play institutionally. But what about those of us who are interested in the current literary situation and the problem of World Literature, not from the perspective of sociology but from that of some kind critical humanism (or a post-colonial anti-humanism, for that matter) with an eye to teaching individual texts?

What I have been suggesting in criticizing the global novel is not exactly the same as, but overlaps with, the critique within postcolonial studies of the cosmopolitan novel or the migrant novel (Boehmer 226-33). Certainly writing for or by cosmopolitan, transnational elites must be understood critically in the assessment of the contemporary field,<sup>17</sup> although this once tended to be grounded within postcolonial studies with reference to some truer or more authentic representation of or engagement with actual local or regional experience: “It remains an open question whether this kind of writing [e.g., Rushdie]<sup>18</sup> holds much meaning for the people—even the members of resident élites—who inhabit the scenes of Third World confusion represented [in noisy hybrid migrant novels]” (232-33). Boehmer continues: “It is significant that postcolonial writers who retain a more national focus, who do not straddle worlds, or translate as well, do not rank as high in the West as do their migrant fellows, or simply remain unknown” (233). The same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for contemporary world

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<sup>17</sup> On migrant writing and lack of belonging Thomsen writes: “It is exactly this lack of belonging that is increasingly seen as a distinctive and productive transcultural element in the migrant writer’s work—and this perception can also be extended to writers who are not migrants, but whose writing can be characterized as transcultural” (126). Is this becoming the new model for world literature?

<sup>18</sup> Similarly, the Warwick Research Collective criticizes the commodification of Latin American magical realism and its South Asian variant associated with Rushdie whereby “the emergence of reactionary forms consonant with the tastes of metropolitan cultural elites [which] demonstrate no conscious or critical registration of social unevenness but tend rather to a facile aesthetics in which globalism, hybridity and connectivity are idealised and celebrated” (80).

writing and the cosmopolitan global novel.

Generally as positive as Damrosch, Thomsen nonetheless notes “potential negative aspects of world literature”: “reduced linguistic capacities” (i.e., Anglophone dominance); “a reduced need for knowledge of context” (i.e., decontextualizing cherry-picking to present an exotic, consumerist smorgasbord for privileged Western undergrads); “and an overreliance on canonical lists” (i.e., a renewed Great Books program with a super-canon degrading further to top 10 lists) (16). These indeed seem to be some of the worst trends within the discipline. Another problem, according to Thomsen—and presumably the reason he devotes so much space in his book to migrant writing<sup>19</sup>—is that what people actually read is current novels and so forth, *not* classics. So unified canons of historical world literature may not be all that relevant to the field of World Literature going forward (31). Thus, it is all the more important to develop a critical account of current canon-formation.

In criticism of Damrosch’s model, Marshall Brown has written, “I propose characterizing world literature as writing that opens readers and discourses to the worldliness of experience” (362), by which he means an experience of difference and otherness. “World literature, to me, is not writing that gains in translation, but writing that retains its alienness even in the original” (364).<sup>20</sup> This sounds good, as a sort of mild criticism of Damrosch who perhaps speaks too much of pleasure and detachment. But how could alien writing (and translations along the lines of Berman towards foreignness) be a criterion of coherence for a canon of World Literature? Instead of works assimilated into a Western liberal worldview with a minimum degree of difficulty and difference—what many criticize World Literature as presenting—we would then have a collection of difficult, alienating, and unassimilable works, perhaps even some utterly un-anthologizable for length or difficulty. This suggestion obviously has little value as a practical pedagogical program, and thus must be meant in a dialectical spirit as a corrective to some of the assimilative tendencies of World Literature as a discipline—e.g., Spivak supporting intense, slow work in “native” languages, not translations, as a very different kind of experience from that proposed by either Damrosch or Moretti (see Spivak, *Death*).

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<sup>19</sup> Including an overly capacious and insufficiently critical notion of “migrant literature” itself. If Michel Houellebecq is a migrant writer, then why not Saramago!

<sup>20</sup> This is either unobjectionable—after all, Harold Bloom characterizes his twenty-six super-canonical writers according to their “Strangeness: a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange” (3)—or overstated, ignoring the (necessary) conservative and consolidating function of the classic and the canonical (Gadamer).

## Conclusion

So what about Saramago? Saramago's status within Portuguese literature is certainly well-established. As Carlos Reis puts it:

No caso de José Saramago, o seu entendimento como autor do cânone não é prejudicado pelo facto de se tratar de um autor que é nosso contemporâneo. Presente já em programas escolares, objecto de inúmeros estudos e distinções académicas, galardoado com importantes prémios literários, José Saramago atingiu a dimensão canónica que um uso singular e inovador da língua literária não põe em causa. Nas suas obras surpreendemos temas, figuras, acções e valores que bem explicam o duplo sentido de *reconhecimento* que nessas obras e por causa delas cultivamos: reconhecimento enquanto identificação com aspectos significativos do nosso viver e da nossa memória colectivas. . . . (Arnaut 11)<sup>21</sup>

Reis speaks here specifically to national consecration (*nosso viver*). Over the course of the 1980s Saramago attained great national prominence (and sales), winning prizes and indeed seeing his books into international translation (especially *Memorial do Convento/Baltasar and Blimunda*). Harold Bloom famously loved the *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ* and included Saramago in the *Western Canon* (1994; 2005). But that work (*O Evangelho segundo Jesus Cristo*, 1991)<sup>22</sup> represents a sort of transition, and by 1995 Saramago underwent a sort of reinvention, “uma espécie de ressimplificação” (Reis 45), the most famous example of which is *Blindness (Ensaio sobre a Cegueira*, 1995).<sup>23</sup> Soon after this shift Saramago was awarded the Nobel Prize (1998), and many of his later works

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<sup>21</sup> “In the case of José Saramago, his understanding as a canonical author is not affected by the fact that he is a contemporary author. Present in school programs, the subject of countless studies and academic distinctions, awarded with important literary awards, José Saramago has reached the canonical dimension that a singular and innovative use of the literary language does not call into question. In his works we find themes, figures, actions and values that well explain the double sense of *recognition* we cultivate: recognition as identification with significant aspects of our collective life and memory.” My translation.

<sup>22</sup> In a 1991 interview Saramago states, “O que me dá gosto é que as minhas histórias são daqui, eu faço-as daqui porque quero que elas falem de aqui, e por isso—e parece que é o que está a acontecer, e talvez o País ganhe alguma coisa com isso—os estrangeiros possam ler uns livros em que se fala da gente concreta que somos nós. No fundo, o que eu quero ser, o que eu quero continuar a ser, é um escritor português, no sentido exacto que a palavra tem” (“What makes me happy is that my stories are from here, I make them from here because I want them to speak from here, and for that—and it seems that this is what is happening, and maybe the country will gain something from it—foreigners can read books that talk about the real people that we are. Basically, what I want to be, what I want to continue to be, is a Portuguese writer, in the exact sense that the word has”; Vieira 507). My translation.

<sup>23</sup> See Chesney “Re-reading Saramago.”

continued the trend of simplification—or, de-localization, if you will (with the exception of the late *A Viagem do Elefante*, 2008). Indeed, Saramago, over the controversy around *The Gospel*, had moved to Lanzarote in 1993. Did Saramago become a migrant writer (like Coetzee in 2002)?<sup>24</sup> Did his works become more cosmopolitan and global? Did he lose touch with Portugal or was he specifically de-localizing to reach a global audience?

The evidence would be the late trilogy of *Blindness*, *All the Names* (*Todos os Nomes*), and *The Cave* (*A Caverna*).<sup>25</sup> While these texts are not set in Portugal and often do not even have named characters, like Beckett's novels they betray their place of origin in sensibility and topography, and are still effectively based in Saramago's Iberian homeland. Nonetheless, they "simplify" out of that context (again, like Beckett) in an attempt to achieve a greater applicability. Such a minimalization is famous in the case of Beckett as a sort of late-modern, philosophico-existentialist move towards general or "universal" validity. Though he has little in common with Beckett, I think Saramago, in books like *Blindness* and *The Cave*, intends something related. He believes that all of contemporary Western society is marked by a kind of moral blindness, and he believes that late-capitalist consumerist society of the spectacle is a sort of cave in which we are living in ignorance of reality and true value. And as we see in *All the Names*, he believes in the universally transformative potential of love, irrespective of sex and even physical appearance, and shows how this can give meaning to a modern life anywhere.<sup>26</sup> This is a minimalist "universalism" that has little to do with cosmopolitanism or migrancy. These books are valuable, and thus candidates for a canon of World Literature, insofar as they pinpoint problems within global capitalist society, and in ways very different from the historically-based class critiques of his earlier career. Like Coetzee's late works, they specifically seek to eschew the local in the interests of a larger critique, made possible by the writers' success (Nobel) from earlier, more local work. This strikes me as an interesting phenomenon for a synchronic contemporary World Literature canon.

I am just not certain that the account given by Walkowitz in *Born Translated*, as exemplary of contemporary World Literature discourse, allows us to appreciate this situation fully. No one would think to characterize the shift in Beckett from the situatedness of *Murphy* to the abstraction of *L'Innommable* as a move toward a cosmopolitan World Literature (even though the later novel was liter-

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<sup>24</sup> *Blindness* manifests a "castilhanização" of Saramago's prose (Vieira 579-80). Is this a sign of migrancy?

<sup>25</sup> Or sextet including *O Homem Duplicado*, *Ensaio sobre a Lucidez*, and *As Intermitências da Morte*. *Caim*, like *The Gospel*, is really a different sort of phenomenon.

<sup>26</sup> See Chesney, "All the Names."

ally “born translated”); indeed, Pascale Casanova has shown how the process of “abstractivation”<sup>27</sup> which characterizes Beckett’s work is a specifically (late) modernist impulse against any kind of prosaic nineteenth-century realism comparable to the drive toward abstraction in the other Modern arts. Similar shifts in later writers—writers during the Age of World Literature—like Coetzee or Saramago are somewhat more difficult to assess in this respect. While I think it is clear that Coetzee follows Beckett in this modernist move, I am less certain about Saramago, who upon the move to Lanzarote certainly started to address at least an Iberian rather than Portuguese audience, on the path to a larger cosmopolitanism. *Blindness* is non-situated allegory (culminating naturally in Fernando Meirelles’s film version [Miramax 2008], a Brazilian-Hollywood adaptation in English geared to a maximal, worldwide audience). *Blindness* is certainly a *global* novel in the sense that it is aimed at an international Lusophone (and perhaps Iberian) audience and, thanks to translatability, toward a global one, which it indeed reached, to great success. Perhaps this very success attests to the novel’s being “born translated.”

In this context we can fruitfully compare Saramago with his compatriot and contemporary António Lobo Antunes. Deeply moved by his experience in the late colonial war in Angola, the psychiatrist Lobo Antunes moved back to Portugal and eventually devoted himself to writing (first novel 1979, *Memória de Elefante*). Many of his works reveal an obsession with the experience of the war, the colonial past of Portugal, and the scars of both fascist dictatorship and colonial violence persisting in contemporary Portuguese society. A good example is *Fado Alexandrino* (1983), which consists of the inter-woven tales—not exactly stream of consciousness, not exactly reported speech, but something in-between—of four soldiers of different ranks (and social class) who fought together in Moçambique, about their lives before, during, and after the “Carnation” Revolution in April 1974—specifically around a regimental get-together (drinking fest) some ten years after their return from Africa. The style of the novel is very difficult, reminiscent of Louis-Ferdinand Céline and especially William Faulkner in the unmarked shifts of focalization between the four characters as well as a number of prostitutes along with them (addressed to an unnamed but present Captain). Interestingly, Apter has devoted a brief (and somewhat bizarre and meandering) chapter of *Against World Literature* to this novel, in a discussion of *fado* as another example of *Unübersetzbarkeit*: “that which impedes translational fluency yet enables critical faculties nonetheless” (*Against* 138)—

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<sup>27</sup> Casanova, *Beckett* 166; or “abstractification,” as her translator puts it (102).

similar to the related and more famous *saudade* (Santoro 929-31). Although it is the word-concept *fado* (and Lobo Antunes's title) that is supposedly untranslatable, the novel itself is offered as an example of a work at once experimental-modernist in form and local-national in content that impedes easy translation, both linguistic and cultural, to other world contexts. Though the novel (and many others by Lobo Antunes) has indeed been widely translated (including into English by the celebrated Gregory Rabassa),<sup>28</sup> and Lobo Antunes has been celebrated critically, especially in France, *Fado Alexandrino* remains a good example of a limit case of translatability within the sphere of World Literature. It is not clear that the specifics of the "postcolonial trauma" (Apter, *Against* 142) so intricately and bewilderingly expressed in the novel can speak very effectively to non-Portuguese readers (how effectively such a difficult modernist text can communicate to the Portuguese themselves is another issue).

Saramago, I would venture, does indeed belong to World Literature. Whether Lobo Antunes does or not depends very much on how we understand the contemporary values of canonization in World Literature. If we understand the current, synchronic system still based on the "value" system of the national diachronies, then Lobo Antunes should probably take his place as a Portuguese contribution to contemporary World Literature just like Saramago (as they do in the Helena Carvalhão Buesca anthology). But if we understand the current system along with Walkowitz, Damrosch, and others, he will remain opaque, best left to the Portuguese. Reading *Fado Alexandrino*, even in translation, is difficult work. Even in Portuguese it is not always possible to separate out the different voices and get a clear sense of what is going on (e.g., 699-701; English 486-87). Like in Faulkner, this is a Modernist inheritance, proof, as far as I am concerned, that Modernism is far from over and still remains a vital aesthetic-ethical choice for many world writers, a way of challenging conventional novelistic discourse that goes hand in hand, as here, with a vital critique of national history and memory. This, however, ought to be of interest to many—for example those interested in global Modernism as a thriving, if minor, dimension of contemporary world literature.

So, what will be the criteria of contemporary canonization beyond the variously-motivated consecrations by the international prizes? That work is valuable for, and counts as, World Literature which satisfies the assessment of some combination of formal and thematic elements that manages to "speak" to . . . to whom? To generalist undergraduates at Harvard (to be uncharitable to Damrosch)? To

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<sup>28</sup> See Rabassa 141-46.

monolingual Anglo-American cosmopolitans? To European and world bi- or multi-lingual elites? It is uncertain. What will appeal, formally and thematically, is obviously the issue: standard realism, magical realism, some extension of Modernism, some playful or self-reflective postmodernism? Auto-fiction involving some or all of these possibilities? And treating globalization, war, trauma, or various cosmopolitan themes? Or—to mock my own inclinations—exotic, touristic forays into innumerable local situations entirely different from globalized, cosmopolitan New York or London, and thus presenting sheer difference and “alienness” (Brown)? Whatever the specific criteria, I think we should do our best as critics and teachers, and thus as participants in canonization and the reproduction of literary values, to encourage (and consecrate) fiction which tries to speak to specific communities (*a gente concreta que somos nós*) about collective problems and concerns, and leave the prize juries to worry about translatability and prestige (Brandes’s warning in the epigraph). This will involve the kind of reliance on local communities and institutions of assessment and expertise that one associates with old-school type comparative literature (and that motivates a project like Moretti’s *Romanzo* and Zhang’s conception of World Comparative Literature, or Buesca’s of *Literatura-Mundo Comparada*). If this means aligning with Huggan, Saussy, Spivak, Apter, and the Complit critics against World Literature, so be it. If the Warwick Research Collective and Nicholas Brown are correct, Complit in the era of Globalization is perforce world literature in any case; it’s just a question of intellectual responsibility, but how we execute its study and teaching is an issue that we have not yet fully solved.

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\*\*Manuscript received 29 Sept. 2021,  
accepted for publication 26 Jan. 2022

