

Kirsch, Adam (2016). *The Global Novel: Writing the World in the 21st Century*. New York: Columbia Global Reports, 105 pp.

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The global novel is the mirror and the lamp of the global age. As 'globalisation' entered common parlance in the '80s, a notion of 'global novel' also appeared, and writers like Ishiguro could confidently proclaim in 1987 that "I am working myself up to writing a kind of epic global novel. I suppose a lot of people are always working themselves up to writing that kind of novel".¹ But the 'global novel' was not and is not always desired, and the phrase did not gain currency in literary studies until the past decade. Adam Kirsch's 2016 book,² published by Columbia Global Reports, is the first introductory attempt to establish the global novel as a legitimate category, paradigmatic for "writing the world in the 21st century".

The legitimacy of the global novel has been contested across the Atlantic, and Kirsch writes "World Literature and Its Discontents" as the first chapter of his defence. Dissenters criticise world literature on aesthetic and political fronts, disparaging the global novel as "diluted and deracinated", plagued by semiotic problems of "the Untranslatable"³ and stylistic deficiencies coupled with political and economic complicities. A common charge is that this genre avoids difficult particularities to maximise readability through simplified language and representation, making foreignness a homogenising commodity in a capitalist world, and hence mediocrity prevails with dumbing-down effects, preventing genuine encounter with differences and challenges. Tim Parks, for instance, deplors the rise of the global novel practiced by Ishiguro and others, and feels nostalgic for writers like Jane Austen who exemplify "culture-specific clutter and linguistic virtuosity", not streamlined tropes or "overstated fantasy

1 Bigsby, Christopher (2008). "In Conversation with Kazuo Ishiguro". *Conversations with Kazuo Ishiguro*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.

2 Quotations retrieved from Kindle edition of the book.

3 Apter, Emily (2013). *Against World Literature*. New York: Verso.

devices of a Rushdie or a Pamuk".⁴ Moreover, whereas some editors bemoan a collapse of postcolonial radicalism and anti-imperialism into such axioms as "freedom of speech" following Rushdie's (1988) and the end of the Cold War,⁵ critics and writers like Minae Mizumura worry that world literature triumphs at the expense of linguistic and mental diversities, advancing rather than checking the imperialism of the English language backed by the hegemony of the United States, and making literatures in other languages provincial or peripheral to what Pascale Casanova calls "the world republic of letters".⁶ But even if aesthetic-political ideals render contemporary world literature "compromised and complaisant", Kirsch insists that the global novel can be more stimulating and enriching than impoverishing.

In theory, Kirsch is largely correct to affirm the possibility and desirability of the global novel. Detractors have every right to remain sceptical, but writing the global novel, as Kirsch says, means "a basic affirmation of the power of literature to represent the world". A new development of "the preeminent modern genre of exploration and explanation", the global novel arises not from writers' desire to gain critical or commercial rewards, but from the condition of life in a global age, and from the potential of fiction to reckon with life and "reveal humanity to itself". Unlike the 18th century when Austen could blithely say "it is a truth universally acknowledged," the 21st-century novelist, Kirsch argues, "must dramatize that unity [of human nature], by plotting local experience against a background that is international and even cosmic". Thus, he suggests:

A global novel can be one that sees humanity on the level of the species, so that its problems and prospects can only be dealt with on the scale of the whole planet; or it can start from the scale of a single neighborhood, showing how even the most constrained of lives are affected by worldwide movements. It can describe a way of life common to people in many places, emphasizing the interchangeability of urban life in the twenty-first century; or it can be one that emphasizes the importance of differences, and the difficulty of communicating across borders. It can deal with traditional cultural markers like appearance and behavior or with elusive cosmic intuitions that seem to transcend place.

4 Parks, Tim (2010). "The Dull New Global Novel". *The New York Review of Books*, February 9, 2010. URL <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2010/02/09/the-dull-new-global-novel/> (2018-12-13).

5 N+1 editors (2013). "World Lite", in "The Evil Issue". Issue 17, N+1. URL <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-17/the-intellectual-situation/world-lite/> (2018-12-13).

6 Casanova, Pascale (1999). *Republique mondiale des lettres*. Paris: Editions du Seuil.

Given such a variety of approaches already perceivably taken by writers, the global novel seems to be “not a unitary genre”, but rather “a medium” for all sorts of stories, sharing experience and imagination of coming to grips with cosmopolitanism, and making world literature tantamount to the literary representation and construction of “a meaningfully global consciousness”.

Kirsch’s argument by example, however, is only half-convincing, since the calibres of his chosen authors vary so much that some of them undermine rather than underline his defence. In the next five chapters, Kirsch turns to empirical evidence provided by supposedly ‘representative’ novels from the “pantheon of world literature”: Pamuk’s (2002), Murakami’s (2009), Bolaño’s (2004), Adichie’s (2013), Hamid’s (2007), Atwood’s (2003), Houellebecq’s (2005), and Ferrante’s Neapolitan quartet (2011-2014). Writing in various languages and forms, these eight novelists have merely one thing in common, that they have “reached worldwide audiences” and achieved their status as “leading figures” in a globalised literary market. Their novels are more or less best-sellers, but there is no critical consensus on their literary quality. Overlooking the latter and asserting that “other studies of world literature” would be incomplete without considering all these writers, Kirsch seems to equate his ‘pantheon’ with the marketplace, and he overstates the importance and correctness of his list. He does address aesthetic and political questions about the novels, as he is aware of the disparities between the authors he discusses in pairs, i.e. Murakami and Bolaño, Adichie and Hamid, Atwood and Houellebecq. However, Kirsch’s indiscriminate inclusion of all them into his pantheon creates a fundamental weakness of his book, vulnerable to the criticisms it seeks to defend against, such as the judgment that world literature is a commodity lacking style or taste. To give a more adequate defence, Kirsch had better focus on the literary value of the global novel, instead of relying on some other criterion.

If Kirsch’s second chapter on Pamuk and final one on Ferrante are relatively unproblematic, then troubles lay in the three chapters in between, which put thematically linked novels in pairs. Kirsch juxtaposes with as two novels about alternate realities, but he merely alludes to what becomes explicit when the same chapter is republished online under the title “Murakami vs. Bolaño: Competing Visions of the Global Novel” (2017): treating Murakami as “a test case for the aesthetic and even moral validity of global literature”, Kirsch does not draw a clear-cut conclusion, until the new title pits Murakami against Bolaño, implying that Murakami is perhaps more of a negative example that attracts criticisms like Tim Parks’. Murakami’s prose style is simplistic, his cultural references quintessentially Western, his characters mostly urban isolates devoid of society, politics, or history, and hence his story is readily translatable and “stripped for export”. By contrast, Bolaño’s novel reflects his sensibility that “the world is divided

into zones of immunity and vulnerability". On the one hand, Europe seems to be "a zone of peace, culture, and self-absorption", where people occupy themselves "with study and with love"; but, the European "hypercivilization" can also be violently intolerant of "foreigners and immigrants who do not share it". On the other hand, Bolaño takes readers to "the sick heart of contemporary reality", like the fictional city of Santa Teresa on the Mexican-American border; by compelling readers to recognize the injustices and crimes propagated by the global economy and its moral contradictions, represents arguably a better species of world literature that undoes "the complacency of global citizenship". In light of Kirsch's essay "In Defence of the Global Novel" (2017), one may infer that while Murakami's writing is stylistically "more culture-industry product than work of art", Bolaño is intellectually "cannier, more self-reflexive and creatively resourceful", writing the true kind of global novel "defined as a novel for which being global is itself a problem", which stimulates "the empathetic imagination of difference a globalised world so direly needs."

If Murakami's position in the "pantheon of world literature" ought to be shaky, the same can be said about Hamid and Houellebecq because of their stylistic or ethical deficiency. Kirsch pairs Adichie with Hamid as two migrant writers "to America and back"; however, is a lightweight novella, a dramatic monologue in which only one character (the narrator) appears real, and hence it is aesthetically substandard as a candidate for the global novel, no matter how cleverly constructed and politically provocative it is. Kirsch shrewdly points out that Hamid's narrator is infatuated with America despite his anti-Americanism, problematizing the global order while fostering an internationalist consciousness. Still, it is unnecessary to use two novelists for making one point, that migrant literature provides a significant portrait of an age in which millions of people cross borders in both directions. Similarly, Atwood and Houellebecq are strange bedfellows whom Kirsch puts together for their fiction of global apocalypse; their novels share many features, but "the Canadian feminist and the French misogynist" should not be equal contenders for the authority or "the right to represent the world in fiction", not to mention that their dystopias may well be "an imperialism of imagination" and "a kind of colonialism" that conflate the experience of modern Western societies with the essence and fate of all humanity. Kirsch cautions about both writers' outlooks, but again, he may easily do without Houellebecq, or Hamid.

By contrast, the choice of Pamuk is expected and that of Ferrante reasonable, even though none would be universally or unquestionably accepted as a representative global novelist. Despite objections from Turkey, Kirsch describes Pamuk as an ambassador to the United Nations of "the world's literary consciousness". Take for example, while its framework is primarily Western rather than Eastern as manifested by the literary conventions and allusions it draws on, the novel represents often repressed voices, which

protest the hegemony of Western narratives. Furthermore, quoting from a character – “I’d like to tell your readers not to believe anything you say about me, anything you say about any of us. No one could understand us from so far away” – Kirsch contends that the novelist acknowledges as well as negates the impossibility of “cultural translation,” which is foundational to world literature, by allowing the reader to understand and feel the character as a real human being. Although Pamuk’s position may be overdetermined when he writes about the East vis-à-vis the West, as Kirsch argues, “there remains the hope that the novel itself might be a genre that encompasses these divisions, not by transcending them in the name of a universal art, but by allowing all points of view to express themselves”. Such diversification of perspectives and voices is evident in Ferrante’s Neapolitan novels as well, which interweave the dialectic of the local and the global with other themes like “violence against women,” an issue commonly binding the global novelists. As mentioned above, there are many ways to write a global novel; by analysing the work of eight novelists, Kirsch offers almost a typology of what the global novel can be. It is not thorough or impeccable, and it exaggerates the representativeness of some writers, but overall, Kirsch’s book is a valuable albeit flawed effort to legitimize the global novel.

Additionally, while Kirsch’s fundamental flaw comes from a neglect of literary value, to better meet the aesthetic and ethical challenges faced by writers and questioned by critics, one may think twice about “global classicism,” proposed by Michael Lind in “World Books” (2015).⁷ Lind may be “elitist” and “conservative”, and Kirsch is right that modernism is not necessarily the foe of classicism, since the modernism of Pound and Joyce is also “radically innovative classicism”. But Lind’s suggestion, as aptly summarised by Kirsch, is sound, that “[t]he global quality of such writing consists not in popularity across cultures, but a cosmopolitan appropriation of the best models of the past, regardless of their linguistic or national origin”. Such cosmopolitan classicism, if treated properly, can be rooted and balanced, and compatible with global democratization.

7 Lind, Michael (2015). “World Books”. *The Smart Set*, Oct. 6. URL <https://thesmartset.com/world-books/> (2018-12-13).

