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## INTRODUCTION

Globalization as Form The world does not quite fit into a book. As I set out to write this study, I penned down this simple, obvious observation on a piece of scratch paper and kept it on my desk. There, it was a useful reminder when dealing with my objects of study, which are, precisely, literary representations of the world. In particular, I examine a select corpus of post-1989 Latin American novels that offer invaluable insights on globalization. I also show how these novels contribute to the task of thinking through a related phenomenon, the emerging articulation of the study of literature on a world scale. These two lines of inquiry converge for its heuristic value.

Nothing offers a more vivid illustration of how aesthetic, historical, and political choices inform a given representation of the world. In more ways than one, the Argentine adds to and illuminates our understanding of the literary representation of a broadening consciousness of the world as a whole—henceforth “globality,” for short.

The Aleph appears in a 1949 eponymous short story published in Buenos Aires, a city now rather well-known around the world but once thought to be on “the edge of the West,” as Beatriz Sarlo might put it.<sup>1</sup> A bookish narrator protagonist, in all ways similar to the author, finds in a soon-to-be demolished house on Garay Street “one of the points in space that contain all points,” further described as “the place where, without admixture or confusion, all the places of the world, seen from every angle, coexist.”<sup>2</sup> Andrew Hurley, for its heuristic value, contained inside it, with no diminution in size. Each thing (the glass surface of a mirror, let us say) was infinite things, because I could clearly see it from every point in the cosmos. I saw the populous sea, saw the dawn and dusk, saw the multitudes of the Americas, saw a silvery spider-web at the center of a black pyramid, saw a broken labyrinth (it was London), saw endless eyes, all very close, studying themselves in me as though in a mirror,... and I felt dizzy, and I wept, because my eyes had seen that secret, hypothetical object whose name has been usurped by men but which no man has ever truly looked upon: the inconceivable universe.<sup>4</sup>

A proverb in the flesh, a proverb rendered concrete—in this powerful description, denotative language becomes music. Words cannot quite designate any particular entity and yet they can suggest an experience that goes beyond the possibilities of both language and cognition. An accomplishment for the Argentine author, it seems, split between his alter ego and his fictional nemesis, Carlos Argentino; a sublation, but not a resolution, of the influential criollismo versus cosmopolitismo debate.<sup>5</sup>

The preeminence of visual language in the passage should not distract from its experiential core: here Borges grounds the experience of globality. Note that this is not just a smaller version of the world we think we know. It would be one thing to describe a world from one point of view and then imagine its miniature; here there is an infinitude of points of view. This paradoxical transfiguration of parts and whole collapses the logic of synecdoche. It depicts a world rich in possibilities, in the full dimension of its becoming.

There are political implications to this strategy. In one conspicuous parenthetical remark in the story, Borges situates London, that quintessential metropolis, in a corner of the cellar of an innocuous house in Buenos Aires, among spider webs no less. This is an understatement, not a Calibanesque affirmation of the Latin American periphery over the Old World; it is more an act of entitlement than one of subversion. However, the gesture does bring about, quite literally, questions about where the center of the universe lies. Symbolically, Borges is situating himself on par with the great monuments of Western, if not global, culture. He is also reassessing the place of his native country in the world. The deed is done, and Borges, who was terrified of the narrow provincialism that Carlos Argentino represents, has gone down in history as a universal author who is also a porteño. Indeed, it takes literary events on the magnitude of Borges's writing to exert a lasting transformation of the hegemonic ways of international cultural prestige.

Contemporary authors have replicated this gesturing toward the global, but to date only the Chilean Roberto Bolaño has gained a critical mass of transnational readership. One of the tenets of this study is showing just how Bolaño and several other authors conceive of their own Alephs, which are similarly playful, transformative, and deserving of an analogous stature. Moreover, this brief discussion of Borges's Aleph provides a quick illustration of how cultural products

may participate in the creation and recreation of narratives of the global. As a cipher of simultaneity and ubiquity, globality is an impossible object made possible within the space of language. Along with several of its cognate concepts, "global" is nothing more and nothing less than a metaphor that operates according to the paradoxical logic of *multum in parvo*. That we have naturalized the metaphor in common parlance does not mean that the term itself is not metaphorical, just as we do not think of a burning candle when we come across the term "Enlightenment."

Indeed, when we ask what globalization is, we may as well ask how to use a metaphor. It is therefore my contention that literature, particularly closely read Latin American literature, still has much to say about this question. While Brian McHale famously described postmodernism as "not a found object, but a manufactured artifact," globality is the opposite: a found object we are only beginning to theorize.<sup>6</sup> Dwelling for a moment on the comparison of "globalization" and "Enlightenment" is instructive. Would an educated reader not know, or vaguely know, what each of these terms means?

We could certainly use them in meaningful sentences even when citing a succinct definition proved difficult. Kant famously "defined" Enlightenment as "man's emergence from his self-imposed immaturity," yet this is not really a definition, but rather the performance of Enlightenment itself. Similarly, when we search for the meaning of globalization in culture—and we do this simultaneously, in numerous locales around the world—we bring about globalization. Thus, when Jan Scholte defines globalization as the growth of supraterritorial social spaces, or when John Tomlinson claims that the cultural dimension of globalization affects the world, or even when Gayatri Spivak states that globalization is only about data, capital, and damage control, they all contribute to the globalization of the discourse on globalization.<sup>7</sup> Such a proliferation of voices denotes less the impossibility of defining a term and more the emergence of a distinctive discursive mode of modern times.

Presenting here yet another "What is Globalization?" piece would be unnecessary. The existing bibliography has been constructing, by accumulation if not terminological consensus, a viable field of enquiry. What I advocate for is an understanding of the global from the ground up—that is, from works themselves, through the internal dynamics of actual cultural products. Despite the compelling case for "distant reading" made in a similar context by my colleague Franco

Moretti, the Aleph calls attention to the fact that individual literary works have always addressed complexity in a “compressed” form.<sup>8</sup> We often say poems, short stories, and novels “create entire worlds” in just a few lines or pages; in doing so, they may elucidate complex ideas, epochs, and many other things, with the aid of ink, paper, and the power of the written word alone.

By the same token, an individual work may articulate globality and even preserve, as Borges’s prose does, a necessary tension between the appeal to a *vue d’ensemble* and the insurmountable situatedness of the perceiving eye. A method consistent with the Aleph will proceed dialectically. Instead of looking for a priori, fixed definitions of what the world is and organizing bodies of literature around them, this method will engage literature’s potential to reveal and transform such notions. It will also pay attention to how Alephs explore the limits of what literature—and, by extension, literary criticism—can say and convey. This leads to taking positivist agendas of rewriting literary history at a planetary level with a grain of salt, while at the same time allowing a discussion on the dynamic relationship between literature and globalization.

As far as working definitions go, I regard “globalization” as a long process of world integration that has both an economic and a cultural dimension. Although I am sensible to debates on whether it starts with the Industrial Revolution, Columbus’s voyages in 1492, or earlier, what concerns me in this book is its latest stage, which I take as qualitatively different from previous periods and which starts roughly in the early 1990s, when the bipolar global order of the Cold War started to dismantle. I understand “world” both as a concrete, geopolitical entity and as any act of literary totalization. The crux of the matter is how these two ideas connect, or fail to do so: worlds depicted, on the one hand, and the actual realm of human activity, on the other. Following current usage, I use “world” and “global” interchangeably unless otherwise specified.

Meanwhile, I regard “world literature” as a critical movement that seeks the consolidation of a more or less stable transnational canon. In other words, I consider “world literature” an “ism.” Unlike movements that have been labeled with the suffix, such as poststructuralism or postmodernism, this new trend presents itself as a horizon, when in fact it is a critical current among others.<sup>9</sup> This end-of-history matter-of-factness should be questioned elsewhere. I, for one, share the overall thrust of the project, but I take issue with some acritical takes

on its articulation. The penchant in this ism is toward considering the world as the organizing principle for literature, when hitherto we have emphasized, for example, individual languages, nations, regions, superstructures, or genealogies. I understand a "global novel" as a novel that can have a world literary standing.

Critics and scholars have a role in maintaining the statuses of texts that already have it, or in promoting the rise of new works. We are a factor amid significant others, which include translation, literary markets, and markets more generally. A pressing question for this book is the status of the global novel in the face of Latin Americanism.<sup>10</sup> That other ism, which assumes "Latin America" as a telos and an organizing principle, is in conflict with the denomination because its cultural products, unlike those that originate in individual metropolitan centers, do not enjoy the condition of being always-already global. This has to do with many familiar issues, such as legacies of colonialism, alleged belatedness, less robust literary markets, or lack of institutional clout in universities and elsewhere. In short: geopolitical disadvantage, which will not go away by ignoring it.

This disadvantage structures how much prominence the presumed "parts" of world literature have within its "whole." In the worst-case scenario, we reproduce in literary criticism a global order that is, still, fundamentally uneven. The novels studied in this book, which I consider exemplary of what I call the "global Latin American novel," are works that may contribute to consolidating, simultaneously, both the world and Latin America as their chambers of resonance. It may be tempting to say that Latin America, being a region, should be subsumed under the broader concept. But that would be an oversimplification, dictated by the faulty logic of synecdoche: the all-too frequent act of taking a writer from the semi-periphery for the whole of that locale. I suspect this familiar reading practice has exacerbated and spread after 1989 with the increase in transnational exchange, on the one hand, and as a backlash against the rise of multipolarity that this new global order makes possible, on the other. It is ironic that, after many decades in which the world had two dominant poles (the United States and the Soviet Union), critics seek to reaffirm center vs. periphery dichotomies when multiple, interconnected centers are quickly becoming a reality.

In the twenty-first century, the synecdochal figure has been Roberto Bolaño, who in many circles has come to represent the entirety of contemporary Latin American literature. Recognizing that paradigm, I seek to turn it against itself, instead showing that Bolaño may be a port of entry into a bigger corpus, not

something that exhausts it. As we shall see, this corpus also includes works by César Aira, Fernando Vallejo, Diamela Eltit, Mario Bellatin, Chico Buarque, and many others. My sense is that the inscription of contemporary Latin American narratives in global culture should originate in the works themselves and carry across other aspects of literature.

This contrasts with the road most taken, which is to decide a priori the categories that define “World Literature,” or simply the literature of the world, for there is room to be skeptical of the reifying effects of capitalization, or of those of agglutination in the Germanic *Weltliteratur*.<sup>11</sup> If we set the rules of the game in advance, what happens with the works that may want to challenge those rules? They are left out of the game, remaining unnoticed, unseen. This is why, within literary works themselves, *Alephs* assert their conditions of possibility. Instead of pretending that metropolitan centers will dictate the frame for world literature, I propose that narrative—and the regional dimension that renders it meaningful—contribute to that act of framing.

It will not only have a say in how it is read within that paradigm, but also in what that paradigm is. Much has been written in recent years about the possibility of world literature, of the methods that should inform such an enterprise, and on the ethical and political ramifications thereof.<sup>12</sup> I will not recast these debates here, but instead offer an alternate approach to some of the dominant—and in my view, erroneous—trends that shape our fields today. My position is that Latin Americanism, which some fear would dissolve and vanish in “World Literaturism,” actually gains from conversing with it. As a whole, Latin America is not particularly exceptionalist or isolationist. Why should its literature be? Despite a disparaging first wave of Latin Americanist responses to the emerging paradigm, World Literaturism is a reality, an influential force in the field of contemporary literary studies—one that, by some accounts, will eventually overtake the entire field of comparative literature. Latin Americanism cannot afford to ignore it.<sup>13</sup> Yet some Latin Americanists regard world literature as a ruse of cultural imperialism, as stated in the words of Roberto Fernández Retamar: “European capitalist expansion had established the premises for a world literature, because it had established the premises for the genuine globalization of the world.”<sup>14</sup> Skeptical of the possibilities of undoing the allegedly imperialist origins of the world literature, this position abandons the question of literature on a world scale altogether as a problem that does not fall under the purview of Latin Americanism. For their part, many world

literature scholars and non-professional readers lack the signposts and cultural expertise for making sense of Latin American letters on their own terms. Paradoxically, it is those same readers who have turned Bolaño into a global phenomenon. This is all the more reason not to gloss over regional differences. Unlike other studies, I fully engage with the specificity of Latin American cultural production, including its institutional configurations, access to markets, and scholarship. Situating Latin American works within a planetary configuration should not mean shedding away the local critical tradition in which they have been embedded. On the contrary, the present conjuncture affords an opportunity to cross-pollinate Latin Americanism and world literature, without forgetting their dissymmetry. Modeling one after the other is not a path I advocate, but rather that of having them bear upon each other, contrapuntally. In that exchange, process matters as much as product. Still, if pressed to give a quick takeaway of this book, I would say the task is not to make Latin American criticism (and that of other regions) fall in step with world literature, but to model world literature after Latin Americanism.

“Latin America” is as utopian a bedrock for literary study as “the world” is. Reading a text qua Latin American or qua of-the-world (for lack of a better term) is a complex decision, a more or less conscious act of framing that may have institutional, ideological, tactical, disciplinary, factual, or simply contingent motivations and biases. But in both cases there is a community the critic seeks to conjure. “Latin America” is an open totality that can inform us about that other, broader, entelechy. It is quite a wonderful construct when one thinks about it, stretching across a vast area, many times the size of Europe, where distinct nation-states are—as the saying goes—“separated by a common language.” This language engulfs both Spanish and Portuguese, for there is increasing intellectual commerce among Hispanophone and Lusophone contexts, as this volume reflects. Why not just read Peruvians apart from Colombians, as distinct from Chileans and Brazilians?

Why not succumb to the geographical evidence that Mexico and Argentina are a hemisphere away? There is something of a leap of faith in reading Borges, Gabriel García Márquez, Gabriela Mistral, or Guimarães Rosa as Latin American, but this leap is one that structures a discipline, a praxis, an ethos.<sup>15</sup> It is not unlike trying to understand how works of fiction may belong to a planetary community. Whereas, given the critical mass and overall influence of U.S. cultural institutions,

an American-inflected take on world literature is becoming hegemonic, I propose a Latin American-inflected vision. I do so from a position within U.S. academia, though in close conversation with other locales. Admittedly, this is an unstable site of enunciation, but it is also one I embrace. In fact, Latin Americanism has a relatively long tradition of reflecting on its double or triple positionality, which results from complex historical processes (for an earlier generation of scholars, compulsory exile being one reason). Well versed in open, unencompassable totalities, Latin Americanists have been generating discourse about a complex region, rich in particularities, while also accounting for the commonalities.

There is much that world literature practitioners could take from that praxis. Of course, someone could say that my Latin Americanist approximation to world literature is partial, but then so are the purportedly ecumenical, disembodied approximations. They are partial by omission, whereas this book assumes its here and now. I do not suggest to cancel out other visions, but to contribute to a larger discussion through position-taking. And so this book is about what contemporary Latin American literature can tell us about ideologies of the global, which in turn underlie any attempt to organize the literature of the world.

This is where another distinctive aspect of Latin Americanism comes into play, namely the vitality of its ideology critique. Critics who travel from the subdisciplines of comparative or world literature to that of Latin American literary studies, or vice versa, often experience something of a culture shock. For Latin Americanists, today's mainstream comparatism is surprisingly apolitical; for those going in the opposite direction, it is surprisingly engaged. This is a generalization, of course, based on anecdotal evidence, but most readers will recognize this to be the case. In university corridors, one can often hear disparaging remarks that Latin American literary studies is "stuck" in politics, as is no longer the case in those other subdisciplines. (An instance of how belatedness is constructed and imposed.)

On the contrary, I believe that Latin Americanism, which has indeed a rich political tradition to draw from, could invigorate world literature debates, especially because it does not sacrifice close reading or attention to the specific forms of works of art in the name of politics. In this way, Latin Americanizing world literature entails both politicizing that paradigm and bringing it closer to texts themselves. Close-reading may seem counterintuitive when talking about literature and globalization. With so many novels, should we not look for broad patterns rather than examine sentence-level structures? Why follow one particular



character around when we can rely on abstractions and types? Why focus on stories when it is modes of storytelling that will lead us to the most encompassing, reliable judgments? I find there is a bias toward abstraction when we talk about globalization and literature, which is fine for the former and detrimental for the latter. Novels, chapters, and paragraphs are very concrete things. At odds with top-down approximations to the study of literature on a world scale, I build on the insights of narratives themselves, from the bottom-up, as active subjects of theory as opposed to passive objects to theorize upon. As I will show, a renewed attention to the language of fiction allows us to understand how cultural production comes to terms with a changing world.

I should also clarify that the kind of close-reading I have in mind is informed both by rhetorical analysis and by ideology critique, though my affinities lie much closer to Adorno than to I. A. Richards, so to speak. Globalization is embedded in ideology; no amount of formalistic, sanitized literary study can do away with this. Consequently, I regard the resuscitation of Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* that has taken place over the last two decades more as a symptom of globalization than as a spontaneous critical movement. That we ourselves are subject to globalization is another reason to proceed dialectically—not just projecting totalizing categories over texts, but describing how those texts conceive of totality. As the latter happens through negativity, it requires contextualization and attentive critical involvement. The global order that a given work of literature depicts is as interesting for analysis as what it obscures from view, but that does not surface without informed, speculative interpretation.

This study makes the case that the insights on the global condition to be found in a corpus of contemporary Latin American novels should lead to their inscription in a transnational literary canon, that is, in "world literature." At the same time, I show how the object that emerges from this critical operation—a novelistic form that is both global and Latin American, that belongs within a regional and a world paradigm—is a key source for a critique of prevailing ideologies of globalization. My approach recognizes that the struggle of works of art and world consciousness takes place at the level of the form; consequently, I develop a method of close reading that supports and potentiates the meaningful frictions and contradictions that constitute the life of the global. This, in a nutshell, is the main argument of this book.

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