globalization and literature
Globalization and Literature
Themes in Twentieth- and Twenty-First-Century Literature and Culture

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The Postcolonial Novel, Richard Lane
To Ayan-Yue

Don’t kid yourself,
The Child is not father of the Man,
But he may already be *il miglior fabbro,*
And that’s worrying enough for this dad.
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Suman Gupta
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1 The Nuances of Globalization

NARRATIVE PERFORMANCE

American novelist Richard Powers’s *Plowing the Dark* (2000) revolves around an early (1980s) prototype of a virtual reality chamber, the ‘Cavern’. Our familiarity with global electronic networks and virtual environments, which characterizes the new millennium at the portal of which this novel appeared, is prefigured in the ‘Cavern’. Protagonists from different disciplines are invited to use this nascent space to realize their visions and advance their understanding of the world. The main protagonist, artist Adie Klarpol, struggles to find an effective aesthetic output from the ‘Cavern’ and doesn’t achieve much beyond creating a 3-D version of Henri Rousseau’s Jungle paintings. Others (mathematicians, meteorologists, etc.) are more successful in advancing their fields. Economist Ronan O’Reilly, like Klarpol, also reaches towards failure in his engagement with the ‘Cavern’, but, unlike Klarpol’s, it is a grand world-encompassing failure. O’Reilly’s ambition is to use the ‘Cavern’ to create a model of the whole globe, and thereby to compute economic futures by taking into account not just a mass of existing economic data but also all kinds of social and political histories and scenarios. His model works – or ultimately doesn’t – as a visualizable virtual environment: in the ‘Cavern’ a virtual globe containing all the information within easy access is thrown up. O’Reilly can simply step into the globe and see the whole physical-social-economic world from the inside, as it were, and call up and compute with all the data he needs from anywhere in the world. O’Reilly’s achievement is first described in Powers’s economical yet vivid style as follows:

O’Reilly assigned the wand’s thumbwheel to a zoom function. A little scrolling and the Earth swelled to a medicine ball or imploded into an atom. With the rub of a thumb, Afghanistan, as it had lately in the world’s imagination, ballooned from an invisible speck to a billboard that filled the field of view.

When the globe grew large enough, O’Reilly simply stepped inside. The Cavern knew where his head was at all times, and rehung its coordinates accordingly. The crust of countries that the projectors served up looked even better from the underside than from the out. Inside, from the vantage of the earth’s core, O’Reilly could inspect the whole theatre at one glance, with no hidden hemisphere
on the far side of a projection. The unbroken surface spread out above him in all directions, like the constellations of the night sky.

He set the wand’s buttons to throw various layers over his planetarium display. The slices of tonal register tracked the range of a variable as it wrestled its way through the proving grounds. Armed with canned data, O’Reilly took the globe out for a test spin. Per capita GDP, in single-year frames. As a function of energy consumption. As a function of consumer spending. All the classical formulae, for which he had only clinical patience, ran as ten-second, color-stabbing short subjects before Our Feature Attraction.

To this clean, coherent display, Ronan fused his ten-dimensional recursive cellular automata. All the furious systems, the flex and tensions of abductors and carpal clasped together in an invisible hand to rock a cradle now eminently observable. On the surface, sunsets and dawns illuminated the familiar jigsaw of the world’s nations. Underneath, a seething snake’s nest of cooperation and competition rippled through the global markets, deciding them. (Powers 2000, 119)

O’Reilly’s extraordinarily ambitious programme fails, it later emerges, because it doesn’t do what it’s designed to do: predict economic futures with a reasonable degree of accuracy.

What is successfully conveyed in this passage is not a foreboding of failure but an apprehension of the enormity, the wholeness, of this splendid construct. There are several interesting ideas that run across that passage. First, there’s the apprehension of the world itself, as a whole, as a complex function of parts and levels, caught between its natural patterns of ‘sunsets and dawns’ and its artificial unfolding through patterns of ‘cooperation and competition’. Second, there’s the notion that the world itself has been grasped through the artifice of O’Reilly’s simulation, brought within his reach by the curious perspectival manoeuvre of being inside the globe and looking at its under-surface, and amenable to his control (subject to a ‘test spin’, open to expansion or contraction, a ‘theatre’ or ‘planetarium’). Third, there’s the somewhat distinct understanding that this simulation is for an instrumental purpose and is at the service of an agent. This agent is an economist cum programmer, O’Reilly, at the controls. Not only does this simulation clarify our understanding of the world, it also thereby bends the world to O’Reilly’s will – the ‘invisible hand to rock a cradle now eminently observable’. Fourth, there’s the tacit understanding that all the above ideas are being conveyed through means, by devices, from a point of view outside the quoted passage. This has to do with the manner in which the language of the quoted passage works. Mediations take place through a descriptive language which is not transparent but curiously opaque, drawing attention to itself. Within the carefully crafted description, clearly visualizable metaphors (‘from an invisible speck to a billboard’, the ‘theatre’ and the ‘planetarium’, ‘the constellations of the night sky’, ‘a seething snake’s nest’) and barely visualizable technical abstractions (‘rehung its coordinates accordingly’, ‘slices of tonal register tracked the range of a variable’, ‘ten-dimensional recursive cellular automata’) are negotiated. An implied
narrative consciousness obviously mediates between seeing the simulation both from within (like the ‘constellations of the night sky’), as O’Reilly does, and from without (‘the crust of countries’, ‘on the surface’). This narrative consciousness also tells the reader both what O’Reilly intends (do a ‘test spin’, ‘inspect the whole theatre’, with ‘clinical patience’) and what it’s like for someone watching him (the metaphors of ‘the constellations of the night sky’ and the ‘seething snake’s nest’ are evidently not descriptions of O’Reilly’s feelings). The invisible narrator tacitly tracks progression in the passage too, so that the function and scope of the simulation becomes gradually clearer for the reader. The language of the passage, in brief, performs these mediations to convey the enormity of an economist’s global vision and ambition.

O’Reilly’s economic ambition and vision cohere broadly with ideas and processes that are now understood as related to globalization. These ideas and processes occupy scholarship in fields as widely dispersed as economics, sociology, culture and media studies, technology, politics, geography and history. I return to the connotations of the term ‘globalization’ shortly. More immediately, I would like to pause on the narrative performance that conveys O’Reilly’s globe-embracing ambition, where language is used to perform and convey something of the intellectual scope and aesthetic stimulation of ideas of globalization. This language is not as precise and systematic as the scholarly language in which globalization is usually discussed. And what is conveyed of globalization is not quite as well ordered as in academic texts about globalization – it is impressionistic. Yet, what is conveyed is suggestive. The quotation from Powers’s novel could be thought of as a snap-shot literary apprehension of globalization. As such, this is a particular sort of literary expression which is of interest to a particular kind of student or researcher: those engaged in literary studies. To pay attention to such literary expressions of globalization is one (there are others) of the objectives of this study, addressed as it is to the relationship between literature and globalization, and written as it is for the purposes of literary studies.

TRAVELS OF A TERM

Impressionistic though such literary expressions of globalization might seem, they are obviously cognisant of the more precise scholarly discussions of globalization. These discussions are as prolific as they are diverse, but the general drift can be quickly grasped by contemplating a few influential definition-like statements. Such succinct statements are invariably given on the understanding that they need systematic elaboration, which is thereafter provided. But even when contemplated in themselves they make immediate and relevant sense. Anthony Giddens’s definition of globalization as ‘the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many
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miles away and vice versa’ (Giddens 1990, 64) is useful in this fashion. So is Martin Albrow’s observation that ‘globalisation effectively means that societies now cannot be seen as systems in an environment of other systems, but as sub-systems of the larger inclusive world society’ (Albrow 1990, 11); as is Roland Robertson’s understanding that ‘Globalization as a concept refers both to the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole’ (Robertson 1992, 8); and as is David Held’s attempt to present the manifold aspects of globalization as ‘a process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in their spatial organisation of social relations and transactions – assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity and impact – generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power’ (Held et al. 1999, 16). These definition-like attempts to characterize the nature of the processes (‘intensification’, ‘compression’, ‘transformation’, at levels of ‘extensity’, ‘intensity’, etc.) denoted by ‘globalization’ are supplemented by numerous succinct attempts at emphasizing the connotative content of ‘globalization’. Martin Albrow’s example can serve here as representative:

GLOBALIZATION

1. Making or being made global:
   (a) in individual instances
      (i) by the active dissemination of practices, values, technology and other human products throughout the globe
      (ii) when global practices and so on exercise an increasing influence over people’s lives
      (iii) when the globe serves as a focus for, or a premise in shaping, human activities
      (iv) in the incremental change occasioned by the interaction of any such instances;
   (b) seen as the generality of such instances;
   (c) such instances being viewed abstractly.
2. A process of making or being made global in any or all of the senses in (1).
3. The historical transformation constituted by the sum of particular forms and instances in (1). (Albrow 1996, 88)

The emphasis in the latter is obviously more on the range of meanings embraced by the term ‘globalization’ than on the description of processes alluded to by it.

Such definition-like statements give the term ‘globalization’ a tractable and definite quality, without thereby restricting its superlative reach. They convey the enormity of globalization’s geographical and disciplinary border crossings and the transgression of different linguistic registers and areas of application and usage. The elaborations that surround these (and such) definitions both recognize the enormity of thinking about globalization and build upon that foundation of tractability and definitiveness that such a
succinct definition-like moment makes available. And yet, even in offering such clear definitions and elaborating on them coherently, a kind of anxiety about the term ‘globalization’ – as a term – is often found. It is as if the scholars offering these definitions and elaborations by way of taming the concept and manifestations of globalization nevertheless feel that it has not been correspondingly tamed. The term seems to possess an autonomous momentum, an uncontrollable currency, which no amount of careful systematization and analysis of its connotations can cover. Put otherwise, it appears to have its own passages and history which are not quite unpacked by charting and theorizing the social, political, economic, cultural processes of globalization. There is therefore an oft noted mismatch between the history and discernment of globalization as process and the history and usage of the term ‘globalization’. This tension is noted by almost all the above-mentioned scholars. Roland Robertson thus observes that:

In academic circles [globalization] was not recognized as a significant concept in spite of diffuse and intermittent usage prior to that, until the early, or even middle, 1980s. During the second half of the 1980s its use increased enormously, so much so that it is virtually impossible to trace the patterns of its contemporary diffusion across a large number of areas of contemporary life in different parts of the world. By now, even though the term is often used very loosely and, indeed, in contradictory ways, it has itself become part of ‘global consciousness’, an aspect of the remarkable proliferation of terms centred as ‘global’. (Robertson 1992, 8)

A similar anxiety about the term occupies Martin Albrow momentarily too:

The term ‘globalization’ binds the syntax of the global and its derivations into a ramifying set of meanings. They are thus effectively entwined in an unfolding story over time. It conveys a widespread sense of transformation of the world. But this tendency to blanket coverage should in itself indicate how unlikely it is to have a precise analytical set of reference points. (Albrow 1996, 86)

And this anxiety appears with almost an air of impatience by the time Zygmunt Bauman begins his study of some of the less observed human consequences of globalization:

‘Globalization’ is on everybody’s lips; a fad word fast turning into a shibboleth, a magic incantation, a pass-key meant to unlock the gates to all present and future mysteries. […] All vague words share a similar fate: the more experiences they pretend to make transparent, the more they themselves become opaque. (Bauman 1998, 1)

Perhaps attention to such linguistic tensions and anxieties is most aptly given by students of literature, and this study is therefore structured more emphatically around the passages, rather than any given definition or conceptualization, of the term ‘globalization’. To come to grips with the relationship between globalization and literature and literary studies it is, this study assumes, more useful to follow the manifold accruals and
dynamics of the term ‘globalization’ than to fit in with any one way or a few ways of conceptualizing and demonstrating globalization. This is all the more expedient here since the term ‘globalization’ has crept into literary studies only very recently. It has shouldered its way, in an as yet uncertain manner, alongside other far more familiar terms that are as embracing and transgressive of boundaries for literary students, such as ‘postmodernism’ and ‘postcolonialism’. The currency of ‘globalization’ has developed largely outside literature and literary studies, mainly at the behest of sociologists and social theorists such as those quoted above – even though the term seems to spin out of their control and impinge everywhere, even upon literature and inside literary studies. Literature and literary studies do not pick up globalization as a concept that emerges, so to speak, from within, but somewhat resistanltly as a term that batters on them from outside and will not be denied, and is larger and more dynamic than its past and present masters.

What follows, therefore, to set the ground for this study of globalization and literature are some cursory observations on the travels and shifting nuances of the term ‘globalization’ – undertaking in a very superficial fashion what Robertson regards as the virtually impossible task of tracing ‘the patterns of its contemporary diffusion’. In effect this also enables a delimitation of the scope of this study, which is largely contained to the relatively short period within which the term ‘globalization’ has had currency. It is assumed that the circulation of the term ‘globalization’ and its manifold meanings demarcates a space–time within which the relationship between globalization and literature can be meaningfully examined.

Richard Kilminster traces the first appearance of the term ‘globalization’ in the Webster dictionary in 1961 and in the Oxford English Dictionary Supplement in 1972 (Kilminster 1997, 257). It was somewhat later that it entered academic parlance in a decisive manner, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, mainly by thrusting aside ‘international’ or ‘world’ or ‘universal’ processes and systems. Most of these initial academic evocations came clearly from a specific North American location and with concordant interests. Though the term itself wasn’t used, Marshall McLuhan’s observations on technological developments in communication and media, implicitly informed by his North American perspective, seemed to set the tone – especially in statements such as: ‘The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village’ (McLuhan 1962, 31); and: ‘Today, after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our central nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned’ (McLuhan 1964, 3).

By the late 1970s the term ‘globalization’ itself started appearing in various academic and specialist forums. It connoted variously the desire to develop the study of sociology in the USA as a world-embracing enterprise or to track such study as it expanded into domains outside the USA (Lamy 1976; Goreau 1983; Parker 1984). More importantly it expressed the desire of
US business leaders and management gurus to extend US business interests, and exploitation of resources and labour, to a global domain (Hopkins 1978; Levitt 1983). Since then the term has gradually been distanced from the specific contexts and interests with which it was initially associated and understood as gesturing towards an increasingly acontextual world condition. In this some of its other early associations helped. The impetus for this direction was given, to some extent, by left-wing intellectuals in the 1970s who associated a growing consolidation of global economic processes and markets with advanced capitalism – e.g. in Eric Hobsbawm’s ‘drawing together of all parts of the globe into a single world’ (1975, 65) – a notion that was more rigorously theorized with the late twentieth century in view in Immanuel Wallerstein’s ‘world capitalist system’ (1974) and Ernest Mandel’s ‘late capitalism’ ([1972] 1978).

The tendency towards decontextualizing the term was underlined in the Brandt Commission report, published in 1980 as North–South. This was the result of deliberations in an independent think-tank under the chairmanship of former German Chancellor Willy Brandt to resolve the impasse between poor and rich nations on terms of loans and assistance through the World Bank. Eighteen countries (none from the communist bloc) were represented in this. The report that followed called for a ‘globalization of policies’ to counter the ‘globalization of dangers and challenges’ (Independent Commission on International Development Issues 1980, 19). Rather contrary to the recommendations of this commission, the ironic result was the devising of a lending system through the World Bank and IMF (structural adjustment loans or structural adjustment facilities) whereby loans to poor countries were made conditional on extensive infrastructural changes, often with unpopular and counterproductive effects (Stiglitz 2003; Chua 2003; Peet 2003). Localized resistance to the consequences of accepting such conditions were evidenced widely, in Algeria, Benin, Bolivia, Ecuador, Jamaica, Jordan, Mexico, Niger, Nigeria, Russia, Sudan, Trinidad, Uganda, Venezuela, Zaire (Congo) and Zambia, among other countries. These coincided with expressions of disaffection with single-party politics and centralized economic arrangements in a number of communist countries. In the course of the 1980s, these resistances were gradually given some coherence as ‘new social movements’ (in a timely fashion in Touraine 1981 and Habermas 1981).

Roughly until the end of the 1980s the term ‘globalization’ usually appeared unambiguously with the ideological weight of its North American–Western European capitalist associations and affirmations, and was located (despite the spread of ‘new social movements’) in the polarized ideological discourse of the Cold War. With the symbolic end of the Cold War (marked by the fall in 1989 of the Berlin Wall) the term ‘globalization’ really came into its own. There were, it seems, two noteworthy sides to manoeuvres around the term ‘globalization’ at this point: 1) it was adjusted to cohere with the vocabulary of activists and NGOs, which in
The advent of ‘globalization’ in the vocabulary of activists and NGOs has a great deal to do with the antonymous coinage ‘anti-globalization’, which was primarily a media invention and rarely used before 1995 elsewhere. The alignments to which the term ‘anti-globalization’ was and continues to be applied – those involved in activism in ‘new social movements’, against global economic regulation and hegemony, and often in favour of local sustainable development – seldom accepted it happily (e.g. Klein 2001). Its thrust in the mass media was (and still is) a largely pejorative one (presenting ‘anti-globalization’ as a disabling, anarchic, anti-technological/anti-modernization stance), evoked while describing such large-scale and multi-front protests as the Seattle anti-WTO demonstrations of 30 November 1999, the Genoa G8 summit protests of July 2001, etc. However, the negative thrust of much mass-media use of ‘anti-globalization’ was turned on its head by deliberately and positively engaging ‘globalization’ to oppose the neoliberal capitalist associations of ‘globalization’. Some of those who were (and continue to be) placed in the so-called anti-globalization alignment coined the phrases ‘globalization-from-above’ and ‘globalization-from-below’ and aligned themselves with the latter. A sort of contest of ‘globalizations’ thus seemed to be set up, a hegemonic and an oppositional anti-hegemonic taking possession of ‘globalization’, perhaps best exemplified in the early 1990s in Brecher, Childs and Cutler 1993. The overall effect of these shifts in ‘globalization’s’ career in the course of the 1990s was of (a) giving the term a greater sense of normative complexity than heretofore – which has thereafter been played upon in a variety of ways by Richard Falk, Naomi Klein, Joseph Stiglitz, Antonio Negri, Michael Hardt, Tim Jordan, David Graeber and numerous others – while, at the same time, (b) stripping it of its earlier one-sided liberal capitalist associations and rendering it more or less normatively neutral, acontextual, applicable to claims from contrary ideological positions.

Such negotiations of the term ‘globalization’ merged into the other kind of proliferating engagements with the term mentioned above, especially in academic and other establishment discourses (political, corporate, media). This entailed simply defining ‘globalization’ as ideologically neutral and as connoting sociologically, economically, politically, culturally and historically relevant transnational processes. Contributions in this direction have been too numerous to be discussed at any length here. I have cited some definitions in this mould at the beginning of this section, and further definitions and elaborations of the term by Jürgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck, Saskia Sassen, Arjun Appadurai, Mike Featherstone and Scott Lash, among
numerous others, come to mind. Most of these gave content to the term by noting processes: in terms of disciplinary emphasis, geopolitical spread, measurable effect and so on. Various strategies for embracing the term ‘globalization’ without immediately entering an arena of ideological battles and contests have worked within these negotiations. These include both defenders of ‘globalization’ as a spontaneous process against ‘anti-globalization’ (e.g. Bhagwati 2004), and those who hold that globalization from above and below should be regarded as a single conjoined process of ‘globalization’ (e.g. Held and McGraw 2002; Held 2004). Further, through these moves the term also became gradually abstracted from specific histories and cultures. ‘Globalization’ seemed to become applicable with retrospective effect, spilling out of its contextual specificities and circulations as a term. Every kind of historical transaction across boundaries, every encounter and imperial venture across history, everything that passed as ‘international’ or ‘world’-based or ‘universal’ in history, could now be invested in the term ‘globalization’. Unsurprisingly, historians accordingly recruited it with this retrospective throw-back effect to stretch far before its existence as a term – markedly in, for instance, O’Rourke and Williamson 1999; Nederveen Pieterse 2003; and Gills and Thompson 2006.

Through these shifts and negotiations ‘globalization’ is now available as one of the most markedly protean and thickly connotative words in our vocabulary. The passages of the term charted briefly above have subsisted to a remarkable degree on the play of terminology, on the deployment of rhetorical strategies. Thus, the above manoeuvres have constantly involved the suggestive deployment of ‘globalization’ in relation to other equally abstract terms, neologisms, variations – such as ‘local’, ‘regional’, ‘nation-state’, ‘transnational’, ‘glocal’, ‘globalist’, etc. Through continuous shifts between decontextualization and repossession, accruals of meanings and abstractions, rhetorical play and redefinitions, ‘globalization’ can now be thrown in apparently meaningfully with regard to almost any kind of issue: so not just in the ‘globalization of media’, the ‘globalization of culture’, the ‘globalization of labour’, but also, by the same token, in the ‘globalization of crime’, the ‘globalization of surveillance’, the ‘globalization of entertainment’, and so on – including naturally, and of particular moment now, the ‘globalization of terrorism’. The situation that obtains at present with regard to the term ‘globalization’ is usefully summarized by Norman Fairclough:

We cannot get away from the fact that although ‘globalization’ is a set of changes which are actually happening in the world (though what the set includes is highly controversial), it is also a word which has quite recently become prominent in the ways in which such changes are represented. But this is a simplification because the word ‘globalization’ is used in various senses within more complex discourses, which are partly characterized by distinctive vocabularies in which ‘globalization’ is related in particular (and differing) ways from other ‘keywords’ such as ‘modernization’, ‘democracy’, ‘markets’, ‘free trade’, ‘flexibility’, ‘liberalization’,