Untranslatables: A World System

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MANY LITERARY HISTORIANS WOULD CONCEDE that the traditional pedagogical organization of the humanities according to national languages and literatures has exceeded its expiration date, yet there is little consensus on alternative models. Mobile demography, immigration, and the dispersion of reading publics through media networks defy such sectorization, yet, thinking the comparative postnationally brooks obvious dangers. Postnationalism can lead to blindness toward the economic and national power struggles that literary politics often front for, while potentially minimizing the conflict among the interests of monocultural states and multilingual communities (as in current U.S. policy that uses an agenda of cultural homogeneity to patrol "immigrant" languages and to curtail bilingual education). National neutrality can also lead, problematically, to the promotion of generic critical lexicons that presume universal translatability or global applicability. Theoretical paradigms, many centered in Western literary practices and conventions, thus "forget" that they are interculturally incommensurate. Moreover, though planetary inclusion may be the goal of new lexicons in contemporary comparative literature, they often paradoxically reinforce dependency on a national/ethnic nominalism that gives rise to new exclusions.

Ideally, one would redesign literary studies to respond critically and in real time to cartographies of emergent world-systems. Parag Khanna, writing from an American "think tank" perspective on the shrinkage of the U.S. as a superpower, usefully identifies a host of new "Second World," midsize empires built up from global trade-offs in resources and financial services whose networks traverse but also bypass "The Big Three" (China, Europe, America). Khanna's nomenclature, from retro regionalisms ("the Middle Kingdom," the "Greater Chinese Co-Prosperity Sphere") to modern transnational acronyms like "the BRIC countries" (Brazil, Russia, India, China, associated through their common status as sites of "the world's greatest concentration of foreign-exchange reserves and savings") assigns renewed momentum to thinking in empires (problematic in my view), but it is at least responsive to geopolitical configurations that overturn Western assumptions about who should be aligned with whom:

To the Western eye, it is a bizarre phenomenon: small Asian nation-states should be balancing against the rising China, but increasingly they rally toward it out of Asian cultural pride and an understanding of the historical-cultural reality of Chinese dominance. And in the former Soviet Central Asian countries—the so-called Stans—China is the new heavyweight player, its manifest destiny pushing its Han pioneers westward while pulling defunct microstates like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as oil-rich Kazakhstan, into its orbit. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization gathers these Central Asian strongmen together with China and Russia and may eventually become the "NATO of the East."[1]

Literary studies, arguably, has yet to catch up with this kind of socio-economic mapping. There is no coincident or contingent structure in place that enables fluid analysis of "Second World" cultural interactions among, say, the "Stans," the Greater Middle East, "Chindia," the Americas, Eurasia, intra-Asia, "other Asias," or Euroland. Certainly transnational research occurs, as does transhistorical or asynchronous historical analysis, but the academic organization of the humanities tends to reimpose national periodizing strictures on knowledge-fields, some of them inherited from area studies. Literary history's cartographic catalogue is thus either constrained by the national habitus, or thrown into the vast agglomerative catchall of "world literature." With respect to the latter, what we find in the place of self-updating world-systems is a proliferation of geographically emptied names that all more or less refer to the same thing—globality—albeit with different political valences. "World Literature" is the blue-chip moniker, benefiting from its pedigreed association with Goethean *Weltliteratur*. World Literature evokes the great comparatist tradition of encyclopedic mastery and scholarly ecumenicalism. It is a kind of big tent model of literary comparatism that, in promoting an ethic of liberal inclusiveness or the formal structures of cultural similitude, often has the collateral effect of blunting political critique. Then there is "the world republic of letters," historically tied to a Francocentric republican ideal of universal excellence ("the literary Greenwich meridian" in Pascale Casanova's ascription), and denoting world literature's adjudicating power manifest in prize-conferring institutions of cultural legitimation. "Cosmopolitanism," (and its contemporary variant "the Cosmopolitical"), both steeped in a Kantian vision of perpetual peace through enlightened common culture, often act as code for an ethics of transnational citizenship, worldliness as the basis of secular criticism, and minoritarian humanism. "Planetarity" would purge "global" of its capitalist sublime, greening its economy, and rendering it accountable to disempowered subjects. "Literary World-Systems," Braudelian and Wallersteinian in inspiration, rely on networks of cultural circulation, literary markets, and genre translation. *Littérature-monde* is the banner term for a writers' movement that refuses postcolonial sectorizations

of the literary field (*Francophonie* is denounced as "the last avatar of colonialism"). Here, decentralized, polyphonic voices that are *mondiale* in address give rise to a concept of fluctuating, relational, unbordered language worlds. I would add to this list "Cities," which treat metropolitan nexuses as metonyms of "World." Despite their current seductiveness as units of analysis for those currently working in literature, "Cities" remain vulnerable to the charge of depoliticization levied recently by a *New Left Review* editor: "city spaces are studied in abstraction from their national contexts," and "the wielders of economic power and social coercion remain anonymous."[2] Efforts to correct for the unipolar logic that persists in each of these paradigms have yielded supplemental vocabularies for nonnational blocs of culture: imagined communities, parastates, translingualism, diaspora, majimboism, postcolonial deterritorialization, silicon cities, circum-Atlantic, *îles-refuges*, the global south, and so on. And though such terms bring some measure of specificity to global designations, they fail to answer fully the challenge of making comparative literature geopolitically case-sensitive and site-specific in ways that avoid reproducing neoimperialist cartographies.

Comparative literature is no more beset than other humanities fields by the constraints imposed by its historic subject fields (genres, periodizing frames, theoretical paradigms). But it faces the rigors of the globalist injunction with a heightened awareness of the Babelian ironies of disciplinary self-naming, and remains more vulnerable than national literatures to the charge of shortchanging nonwestern approaches because of its commitment to inclusiveness. I would suggest that a translational model of comparative literature goes some distance to answering such concerns. Languages are inherently transnational; their plurilingual composition embodies histories of language travel that do not necessarily reproduce imperial trajectories. They afford a planetary approach to literary history that responds to the dynamics of geopolitics without shying away from fractious border wars. In my own work, this translational transnationalism corresponds to a critical praxis capable of adjusting literary technics—interlinear translation, exegesis, gloss, close reading—to the exigencies of a contemporary language politics marked by:[3]

- Language diasporas that bolster transnational literary communities.
- The internationalization of (North) American literary studies, multilingualism from within.
- The critique of linguistic imperialism: specifically global English and the bipolar competition for language dominance between English and Mandarin Chinese.
- The ecology of endangered languages and the statistics of language extinction.

- The impact of accents, vernacular, code-switching, argot and diglossia, within nonstandard language use.
- Translation and war: and the particular vulnerability of translators, stringers, cultural interpreters to political targeting.
- The conflation of anti-terror and anti-immigrant language politics (exemplified in language profiling and linguistic racism, or the merging of Arabophobia and Hispanophobia).
- The critique of legislation aimed at shrinking language literacy. The self-defeating parochialism of English-Only policies. The blindness to the socio-economic advantages of English-Plus in the world economy.

In addition to being a field in which the Realpolitik of language conflict meets the philological heritage of humanistic transference, displacement, and exile, contemporary translation studies answers comparative literature's longstanding commitment to investigating zones of cultural and literary expression that go unnamed or that are walled off into untranslatability. Untranslatability is not unlike Walter Benjamin's notion of translatability; qualified as something that cannot be communicated in language, a kernel of "the foreign" that remains, an ineffable textual essence only realizable in the translational afterlife, or a sacred literalness of the revelatory word that great literary works strive for but rarely ever achieve.[4] I would mobilize this theoretical (un)translatability for theoretical and curricular ventures in literary comparatism that aim for geopolitical specificity and theoretical reach against the fine grain of aesthetic comparison.

A recent encyclopedic project edited by Barbara Cassin, titled *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Vocabulary of European Philosophy: A Dictionary of Untranslatables), produces global intellectual cartography without a hegemonic global paradigm, that is to say, through interpretive procedures that reveal philosophical world-systems in the making. The book uses untranslatability as an epistemological fulcrum for rethinking philosophical concepts and discourses of the humanities. With critical finesse, it calls into question the very possibility of naming the predicates of Western thought, even as it shows how such lodestones have been and continue to be actively translated. This semantic predicament is consequential for the humanities and useful in defining a translational condition that complicates nation-based epistemes and literary denominations. Using the *Vocabulaire*'s construct of the Untranslatable, one might construe a translational humanities whose fault-lines traverse the cultural subdivisions of nation or "foreign" language, while coalescing around hubs of irreducible singularity.

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With approximately 150 contributors, a text length comprising 1.5 million words, and a linguistic range that includes ancient languages (Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Arabic) and myriad modern ones (English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Basque, Catalan, Italian, German, Dutch, Russian, Ukrainian, Polish, Swedish, Finnish, Danish, Hungarian Arabic), the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies* represents a unique experiment in plurilingual analysis. Though ideally it would have had a companion volume covering Asian, African, Indian, and Middle Eastern languages, the *Vocabulaire* succeeds within its terms as a latter-day version of the humanist *translatio studii.* Each entry is cued to a multilingual complement: the subject pronoun "I", for example, is keyed to: French, *je, moi, soi*; Greek, *egô*; Latin, *ego, ipse*; German, *Ich, Selbst*; English, *me, self, myself*; Italian, *io, se, si, si-mismo.* Right away, the alterity of signifiers is made visible, preparing the way for a more systematic presentation of concepts labeled in their native tongues and alphabets. Peter Osborne characterizes the Untranslatable as that which refers to "the conceptual differences carried by the differences between languages, not in a pure form, but via the fractured histories of translation through which European philosophies have been constituted."[5] Cassin, perhaps more geopolitically attuned, speaks of a "cartography of philosophical differences."[6]

The Untranslatable yields a revisionist history of ideas that gives full weight to mistranslation. This way of working is especially apparent in the entry on the Subject coauthored by Etienne Balibar, Barbara Cassin, and Alain de Libera.

We know that Averroes' *Long Commentary on the De Anima* is, given the current state of the corpus, fully accessible only in Latin, or in Michel Scot's tricky translation (the Arabic original having been lost). One of the most famous statements, in which Averroes appears to introduce the notion of the subject, is the passage on eternity and the corruptability of the theoretical intellect—the ultimate human perfection. It asserts: "Perhaps philosophy always exists in the greater part of the subject, just as the man exists thanks to man, and just as the horse exists thanks to horse." What does the expression mean? Going against the very principles of Averroes' noetics, the Averroist Jean de Jandun understands it to mean that "philosophy is perfect in the greater part of its subject (*sui subjecti*)," or in other words "in most men" (*in majori parte hominum*). There are no grounds for this interpretation. We can explain it, however, if we recall that Averroes' Latin translator has confused the Arabic terms *mawdu* [موضوع] (subject or substratum in the sense of *hupokeimenon*) and *mawdi* [موضع] (place). When Averroes simply says that philosophy has always existed "in the greater part of the place," meaning "almost everywhere," Jean understands him as saying that it has as its subject "the majority of men," as every man (or almost every man) contributes to a full (perfect) realization in keeping with his knowledge and aptitudes. "Subjectivity" does slip into Averroism here, but only because of a huge misunderstanding resulting from a translator's error. It therefore contradicts Averroes.[7]

For Balibar, Cassin, and de Libera, mistranslation is adduced to explain the historic transformation of Aristotle's *hupokeimenon* (substrate, the individual substance in a given form) into *subjectum* (I-ness, *égoité*, the subject of metaphysics, the power of thought). The nontransference of medieval heteronomy (the it-ness of I) is shown to haunt modern concepts of free will, egoic autonomy, and transcendent subjecthood. Balibar, Cassin, and de Libera demonstrate how translation error has been determinative in the genealogy of the subject. The Cartesian subject, they argue, was improperly transcendentalized by Kant; while the Nietzschean *Subjekt* (which contains a critique of the effects of subjective submission) was confounded by the French *sujet*, a term that fails to render the slide between commanding and obeying inherent in Nietzsche's usage.[8] The "subject" is thus revealed not only to have an interesting intra-European and transtemporal history, but also a "global" frame of reference that puts Arabic mistranslation into dialogue with mistranslated French Nietzscheanism.

As a stand-alone term with no ready equivalent, *pravda* is another paramount Untranslatable. It is arrayed alongside the Greek *dikaiosunê*, the Latin *justitia*, the English *righteousness, justice, truth*, as well as *vérité, droit, istina, loi, mir, postupok, praxis, sobornost'*, and *svet*. The article speculates that *pravda*'s absence in the Russian *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* is attributable to it being too ideologically marked as the name of the USSR's official, government-controlled newspaper. *Pravda* thus comes into its own as that which is philosophically off-limits in its home country. This national dislocation matches up with its semantic relocation in the interstices of nonequivalent abstract nouns. The article locates *pravda* in the "hiatus" between legality and legitimacy, justice and truth, ethics and praxis. It is traced to the "short circuiting" of pardon by vengeance and vice versa. The word's (often colliding) ascriptions include: democratic cosmopolitics; an extensive topology of exile, emigration, and solidarity with persecuted minorities and refugees; Russian Saint-Simonianism and Russophilic worldviews. Placed in apposition to *slovo*, *pravda* connotes "word," "discourse," "logos," linguistically embodied rationalism. *Pravda-Dikaiosunê*, we learn, is one of the names for God, as well as a figure of free speech, or open relationality among free agents. Negatively qualified as *nevprada* the word alludes to linguistic mystification, to misinformation spread by corrupted institutions of state power and the media (*pravdophobia* was apparently coined at the time of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986 when the official media lied about its severity). The *pravda* entry, like many others in the *Vocabulaire*, allows us to grasp how an Untranslatable moves—often with tension and violence—between historically and nationally circumscribed contexts to unbounded conceptual outposts, resistant yet mobile.

The Untranslatable emerges as something on the order of an "Incredible," an *Incontournable*, an "Untouchable," (translated as an "L'Incorruptible" in French). There is a quality of militant semiotic intransigence attached to the Untranslatable, making it more than just a garden-variety keyword. We sense this when Benjamin Buchloh, writing in an art journal about political apathy toward the Iraq War, evokes "a pervasive *Untertan* mentality." An accompanying note explains: "We are using this untranslatable German term because of its historical precision in identifying the authoritarian personality of the fully subjected subject and its servility to the authority of the State, as Heinrich Mann portrayed it in his 1914 novel of that title."[9] "Man of Straw," "The Patrioteer," "The Loyal Subject," each has performed due diligence as an English title, but each falls short of capturing the fecklessness of Mann's protofascist citizen of Wilhelmine Germany, or in a more extended sense, the Kantian political subject, taken from the Latin *subditus*, meaning those obedient to the sovereign. The irrefragable Germanness of *Untertan* registers the small shock of its untranslatableness when applied by Buchloh to a description of the anemic protest culture of North American students. In a lighter vein, Marina Warner makes the Untranslatable operative in her analysis of "estrangement in the foreign tongue," as a favored effect of Mallarmé's English examples in *Thèmes anglais* (as in "Who can shave an egg?") or Beckett's French (as in the grammatically off-kilter response to a query about why he chose to write in French: "Pour faire remarquer moi").[10] In the case of Mallarmé, it is to be wondered whether he heard or saw an Englishman shaving an egg (or indeed any number of never-uttered yet supposedly commonplace English sayings). In the case of Beckett, the correct grammatical construct "pour me faire remarquer" produces a possible world of the Untranslatable through the awkward mental locution "to make notice, me."

This effect of the noncarryover that carries over nonetheless, or that transmits at a half-crocked semantic angle, endows the Untranslatable with a distinct symptomology. Words that assign new meanings to old terms, neologisms, names for ideas that are continually retranslated or mistranslated, translations that are obviously incommensurate (as in *esprit* to *mind* or *Geist*), these are among the most salient symptoms of the genuine Untranslatable. The Anglophone reader might well be baffled by an extended entry on *Paronyme* ("derivatively named," "denominative"), and that is just the point. Brought to an unfamiliar linguistic *nomos*, the reader is introduced to the language world of Boethius's translation of Aristotle's work on categories, and to a lost set of associations around the denominative that pinpoint an intermediary semantic zone between homonym and synonym (*VEP* 897). Semantically related to "predication," a more universally recognized concept with a substantial

philosophical literature devoted to it in analytic philosophy, paronym could in theory have been filed under predication, but that would have literally diminished its space in the geography of philosophy. The editors want it revalued as a hinge between ancient and medieval scholasticism and ordinary language philosophy. The differential weight assigned by cultures to common cognates is also registered in the distribution of pages to ideas. A word like "force," that hardly qualifies as a philosophical concept in the Anglophone context, warrants a substantive entry in French. Grouped with *dunamis, energeia, entelekheia, virtus, Kraft, Wirkung, pouvoir,* and *puissance,* "force" straddles entelechy, physics, bodily substance, conservation, and power. In another case, the term "sensation" (a crux of British empiricism) shrinks in scale upon being continentalized; that is, colonized under the entries *sens* and *sentir.* Such a move reveals how Anglo-American philosophical traditions are typically negotiated, or not, within Europe. Ordinary language philosophy, along with the names of its avatars—Wittgenstein, Russell, Austin, Quine, and Cavell—are duly represented in the *Vocabulaire,* but the imperium of English is polemically curtailed. Analytic philosophy's inveterate hostility to its continental counterpart, its obsession with (to borrow Cassin's expression) "deflating the windbags of metaphysics," creates a gulf of untranslatability as much cultural as it is intellectual (*VEP* xix).

Throughout the volume, chasms among discrete philosophical cultures are revealed in stark relief. Nowhere are they more evident than in the entries devoted to language names. Notwithstanding the *Vocabulaire*'s express commitment to undercutting national language ontologies, there is a measure of national recidivism in these entries. "Portuguese" becomes a hymn to the sensibility of the baroque with *le fado* (fate, fibula, lassitude, melancholia) its emblematic figure. "German" hews to the language of Kant and Hegel. "Greek" is pinioned by the Athenian efflorescence and Heidegger's homage to Greek as the *Ursprache* of philosophy. "Italian" remains indebted to Machiavelli's notion of "the effective truth of things" and Vico's philological historicism. In tracing how "French" came to be globally identified as a preeminent language of philosophy, Alain Badiou defaults to national language myths when he insists that for Descartes, Bergson, Sartre, Deleuze, and Lacan, to philosophize is inseparable from marking the mother tongue (*VEP* 465–66). Unlike German, whose truth is attained through verbal and syntactic unraveling, French syntax is transparent to truth. Close to being an Adamic language in Badiou's ascription, it lends itself to logical formalism, axioms, maxims, and universal principles. Above all, for Badiou, the French language is conducive to the politicization of expression; unseating predicates through the play of substitutions and the art of the imperious question (what Lacan called the "denunciatory enunciation") (*VEP* 471). Badiou

backhandedly returns national ontology to linguistic nominalism. Such ontologies are, of course, impossible to purge entirely from language names for they lend coherence to the world map of languages; they triage and circumscribe the verbal grammatical protocols that qualify for naming as a discrete language. Even the term "translation," which in a sense signifies language in a state of nonbelonging, or nationalism degree zero, is nationally marked. The *Vocabulaire* entry on "translation" notes that *dolmetschen*, a "lost" verb whose origins go back to Luther's translation of the Bible into German, renders "to translate" as, literally, "to render as German" or "to Germanize." Friedrich Schleiermacher was instrumental in replacing *dolmetschen* with *übersetzung* on the grounds that *dolmetschen* referred to the functional work of the interpreter while *übersetzung* referred to the loftier challenge of rendering thought. From this perspective, *übersetzung* is the name of a disavowed Germanocentrism that clings to the history of the word "translation" (*VEP* 1316).

Must the names for language, including the names for translation, always revert to a predicate of *ethnos*? The current fight over the nation-name "Macedonia" (which involves Greece's allegation that the former Yugoslav republic has no legitimate claim to an appellation that also designates a northern Greek province) suggests that they must. The Greece-Macedonia dispute shows not only that nation-names are deep structural referents of regional, ethnic chauvinism, but also that they function as name-domains or trademarked political zones that guarantee a country's claim to self-ownership and right to enter the fray of international power politics (which in Macedonia's case means access to NATO membership).

Pierre Bourdieu recognized the power of language names as incontrovertible cognates, though he worked politically towards a linguistic International. In a 1995 issue of *Liber*, he called for a language of the "collective intellectual" that would denationalize the dissemination of ideas and information:

To contribute effectively to the realistic internationalism that is its *raison d'être*, *Liber* has initiated two complementary strategies. On the one hand, it has sought to offer its Turkish, Greek, German and Bulgarian readers the possibility of familiarizing themselves with English, Scottish, Czech and Irish authors, works and institutions—and vice versa—and make known on the international scale particularities bound up with national traditions (this is the particular function of issues devoted to a single country, or analyses and descriptions of singular features and characteristics of a historical tradition under headings such as "Untranslatable" or "European ethnography"). On the other hand, it has set out to bring together and compare different analyses of the same particular object (in this case intellectuals) as it presents itself in different national cultures, showing in this way, against the presuppositions and stereotypes of superficial journalism,

facts and effects that are to be found on all sides, invariants that are denied or ignored just as infallibly by the vague and pompous assertions of international meetings and reviews, as by descriptions limited to a single nation. By thus enabling readers from different countries to read in their own language texts that are free of the anecdotal particularities that fill national newspapers and reviews, and filled with information that on the contrary is absent because it is taken for granted by those familiar with it, we hope to contribute, patiently but constantly, to leading them out of the limits of their national universe and creating a kind of collective intellectual, freed from the idolatry of those cultural idioms that are too often identified with culture.[11]

Bourdieu displaces language from its habitus by freeing it "from the idolatry of cultural idioms." He imagines a neutral zone of print literacy and media dissemination capable of transcribing the political in a pure state, "outside the national universe." Bourdieu treats the Untranslatable as a critical unit conscripted for a media commons perhaps not so distant from Habermas's discursive public sphere. Like Cassin, Bourdieu would pose an ideal of linguistic *civitas* over and against ethnic and nation-based language cartographies. What emerges is a translation zone constructed off the power grid of dominant world languages and potentially mobilized around what Jacques Rancière characterizes as *la mésentente* (an extended notion of diplomatic disagreement)[12] or what Christopher Prendergast describes as a "negotiation," "the minimalist presupposition of some common language in and over which to negotiate, although without in any way papering over the many cognitive misfits and value clashes that might and do arise in the conduct of negotiations."[13]

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Where Cassin and Bourdieu rely on the Untranslatable to rethink the geopolitics of knowledge and information distribution, Franco Moretti has explored the potential of the Untranslatable in the field of literary history, treating it as a catalyst of narrative world-systems in *The Novel*, an ambitious collective study of the world history of a genre under his editorial supervision. *The Novel*'s "Critical Apparatus," he writes, refers to a "wider ecosystem, focusing, for instance, on how the semantic field of 'narrative' took shape around keywords such as *midrash, monogatari, xiaoshuo, qissa*—and, why not, *romance*."[14] What is crucial is that the names for generic forms in Hebrew, Japanese, Mandarin, and Arabic are allowed to stand in their original languages. As Untranslatables, they prompt the Western reader to reverse the order of comparison, with *midrash, monogatari, xiaoshuo*, and *qissa* serving as *points de repères* against which Western prose forms should be measured. The Japanese *monogatari*,

whose most celebrated exemplar is *The Pillow Book* and which is characterized as a genre of feminine fantasy, amorous intrigue, and leisure-class pastimes, would then be a logical default for consideration of Western genres of popular romance (*N* 241–48). Similarly, the Arabic *qissa*—a generic term for narrative associated with religious instruction qualified as less translatable than, say, the *mathal* (fable), the *nadira* (anecdote), or the *sira* (chivalric tale)—would center a global curriculum devoted to religious and secular literary expression (*N* 262). Though *The Novel* assigns only restricted space to these narrative Untranslatables, and thus falls short of a thoroughgoing realignment of the global literary field, it prompts the elaboration of a literary world-systems theory constructed on Untranslatable generic typology.

   Moretti has for quite some time used world-systems to develop "big" paradigms for comparative work on the history of the novel. His much cited essay "Conjectures on World Literature," together with books including *The Modern Epic: The World-System from Goethe to Garcia Marquez* (1996), *Atlas of the European Novel 1800–1900* (1998), and *Graphs, Maps, Trees* (2005), examined how genres, styles, and subgenres (picaresque, sentimental novels, oriental tales, war stories, minor historical novels, village stories, bildungsroman, naturalist fiction, decadent poetry, modernist narrative, New Woman novels), might be taken as literary units of value equivalent to units of economic capital. The mention of "abstract models" in the subtitle of *Graphs, Maps, Trees* confirms an unabashed admiration for quantitative history, geographic maps, and topological schemata. This love of system, often alien to humanists, is traced back to the "scientific spirit" of Marxism, acknowledged by Moretti as crucial to the motivation of his method. Moretti marshals science in the service of understanding literature as a socialization process responsible for cultural power structures, class hierarchies, the bourgeois domestication of consciousness, and the revolutionary potential of intellectual labor. In *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, the political purpose of literary history seems less evident than Moretti's scientific ends: "while recent literary theory was turning for inspiration towards French and German metaphysics," he writes, "I kept thinking there was actually much more to be learned from the natural and the social sciences."[15] Neo-Darwinian calculations of how a literary "tree" selects for maximizing its survival supplant the earlier emphasis on global narrative economy.

   Though Moretti's rehabilitation of evolutionary theory has been criticized as a throwback to nineteenth-century theories of natural selection (with their eugenicist baggage), his modeling of literary life cycles, seasoned with quirky examples, opens up new directions for systems theory in the marriage of biogenetics and philology, some of them already announced in the neovitalist materialism of the late French philosopher

Gilles Deleuze. The afterword to *Graphs, Maps, Trees*, contributed by the evolutionary biologist Alberto Piazza, explores the possibility of literal analogies between linguistic and DNA codes. When Moretti asserts, for example, that the bildungsroman emerged after the French Revolution "in response to a precise social need," that is to say, for the sake of mediating "the conflicting demands of freedom and stability," Piazza reads his argument as illustrative of how "even literary genres cannot survive without cultural variety" (*GMT* 99). The open or closed status of a literary world-system is thus defined in terms of the system's ability to mutate like a microorganism or species. "Literary writing," Piazza alleges, "can be construed as a system that is not bound by the particular instruments it has itself created, and is therefore capable of metabolizing metaphors and ambiguities belonging to several systems of knowledge" (*GMT* 95). In pushing analogies between biological and literary metabolism, Piazza fixes on "translation" as the literary process most comparable to natural selection, random genetic drift, and migration. "*Graphs, Maps, Trees* does not tell us how far translation of the same novel into different languages may alter the reception and success of a literary genre in the country where it is translated, but Moretti's findings in the third chapter of *Atlas of the European Novel*, on literary diffusion and the correlation between literary models and geographical space, suggest an important role for migration, not of people but of 'forms', at least in Europe" (*GMT* 104). Though translation, in Piazza's estimation, affords an imprecise measure of literary survival, it nonetheless emerges as a crucial variable in the determination of a literary form's capacity for migration and mutation. Implicitly capitalizing on the common derivation in *genus* (type or species) of the words genre and gene, Piazza assigns translatability a signal role in biogenetic and literary evolution.

For Moretti, translatablity is defined both in market terms (by mapping or graphing a genre's circulation, influence, imitation, marketability, election to the canon, congeniality to cultural comparatism, and appropriation) and in evolutionary terms (as when he hypothesizes that "morphological novelty" results from "spatial discontinuity" [*GMT* 90]). "Take a form," he writes, "follow it from space to space, and study the reasons for its transformations: the 'opportunistic, hence unpredictable' reasons of evolution, in Ernst Mayr's words. And of course the multiplicity of spaces is the great challenge, and the curse, almost, of comparative literature: but it is also its peculiar strength, because it is only in such a wide, non-homogeneous geography that some fundamental principles of cultural history become manifest" (*GMT* 90). Here, it would seem, texts must experience the condition of exile. Transplanted from their native soil and forced to encounter extreme cultural and linguistic difference, literary forms jump the line into morphological innovation. This hap-

pens, according to Moretti, when a form like "free indirect discourse" (associated with the postrevolutionary nineteenth-century European novel, famous for bringing unruly subjective consciousness into line with bourgeois *idées recues* via the conceit of a covertly inserted omniscient narrator) travels to Russia and confronts an alien discursive mode. As Flaubert becomes Dostoevsky, as *Madame Bovary* turns into *Crime and Punishment*, the supposed passivity of free indirect style gives way to an active stream of consciousness delivered as riposte in the second person singular voice. The conclusion one is meant to draw from this example is that substantive generic modification occurs not because "difference" is reconciled in hybridity (that would be a "dialogic free indirect discourse"), but rather, as a result of the absence of mediation. Born of Dostoevsky's "genius," dialogism emerges as the equivalent of genetic drift, that is to say, a new morphology or novelty literary form.

Whether or not one is fully persuaded by Moretti's literary examples, his focus on the diversification and speciation of literary forms highlights critical issues and questions for the study of world literature: Are new genres made by virtue of translation failure? Is the lack of a common ground of comparison a spur to literary evolution? Does differentiation (in the species sense) necessarily come at the expense of hybridity models of cultural difference? Is the interdependency of narrative markets—crucial to a Wallersteinian model of literary world-systems—now simply the economic symptom of literary survivalism? Is a genre's travel the measure of its aliveness, its drift the gauge of force required to break open the bounds of a closed world-system? When Moretti speaks of "a materialist conception of form" that would reveal "form as force," it would seem that he is reimagining the literary world-system as a universe of competing national galaxies, each combating the other for title to possession of the maximum number of novelty genres; each rivaling the other to become the universal form of a homogenized, capitalized global lit (*GMT* 92).[16]

A competitive model of literary world-systems drafted from Moretti's evolutionary teleology may at the very least prove useful in addressing the need for viable paradigms of East-West comparatism. As Asia and Euro-America increasingly position themselves as bipolar models of oneworldedness, each vying to outflank the other in becoming the "one world" arbiter or default mode for the terms of cultural comparison, sur-vivalism comes back into play, albeit in a rebarbatively Malthusian mode. Two empires, one could say, are engaged in mimetic rivalry, exacerbated by high walls of linguistic untranslatability and divergent conceptions of the citizen-subject. Two world-systems, locked into an agon for linguistic hegemony pitting, say, Global Chinese against Global English. As many see it, twenty-first century language politics will increasingly underwrite

the future of literary historiography, especially intra-Asian and Euro-American literary world-systems. Global Chinese builds on the imperial history of Chinese characters in other Asian alphabets, whereas Global English builds on the imperial history of Romanization and humanist literacy networks.

Both Global Chinese and Global English already serve as linguae francae of the Internet. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has observed that pinyin and Basic English (or "Globlish" as it is sometimes called) extend their hegemony to the detriment of poetic expression overall:

Language is there because we want to touch another. . . . There will be global English only when every child in the world learns English this way. I am deeply troubled by claims to global English. I should perhaps include Chinese here. For it is sometimes claimed that the Internet can go Chinese. I think for that to happen Chinese will probably have to go beyond simplified characters and confine itself to the twenty-six letters of pinyin, make its tonal system contextual. Then, since its grammar is simpler than that of English, we can make the same troubling pronouncement about Chinese. There will be global Chinese when every child in the world learns Chinese this way.

If globalization is as inexorable, powerful and inevitable as it is claimed by its theorists, it is possible that the imagination will have to find its habitat within Chinese and English, two languages whose superb poetic traditions will be inaccessible in their globalized versions, because imagination, implicit in poetry, takes time to train and is therefore inconvenient.[17]

Spivak hardly endorses a vision of dueling world languages, each driven by unilateralist goals of global preeminence. In *Other Asias*, she states clearly that "Sinocentric world-systems theories legitimize Eurocentrism by reversal."[18] She also communicates her reservations towards "the claim to the *word* 'Asia,' . . . . To search thus for an originary name is not a pathology. Yet it must at the same time be resisted. The desire is its own resistance. Today more than ever, 'Asia' is uncritically regionalist, thinks 'Asia' metonymically in terms of its own region, and sees as its other the 'West,' meaning, increasingly, the United States."[19] Spivak leaves us wondering how to fashion a noncentric comparatism that might break the "systems" chokehold. This end will undoubtedly remain elusive as long as Asian genres and styles continue to be referred to as formalist categories with a Eurocentric, Orientalist inflection.

Decadence, abstraction, chinoiserie (transferred from the decorative arts to literary description), and *japonisme* are obvious examples of the West naming Asian aesthetics in its own languages. The last—*japonisme*—offers a particularly exemplary case study of the West's hegemonic hold on global modernism. From Stéphane Mallarmé, Victor Segalen, Lafcadio Hearn, Ernest Fenollosa, Ezra Pound, W. B. Yeats, Henri Michaux, and

Wallace Stevens, *japonisme* has been cued to haiku-esque brevity, blank spaces, ellipsis, understatement, and imagism. "California *japonisme*," stamped by the regional/ecological/spiritual aesthetic of California Beat poets Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Creeley, Gary Snyder, Philip Whalen, and Cid Corman extended the life of this first-wave modernism, as did the application of *japonisme* to minimalist abstraction, ideographic visual signs, and a purist international style throughout the twentieth century. If the term "International Style" in architecture came to be associated in midcentury modernism with generic white minimalism and a geometric formalism that borrowed from Shoji screens, and stripped-down décor, so it was affixed to literary modernists who worshipped the white page and showed a stylistic propensity for understatement or subtractive aesthetics. As minimalism gained ascendancy and maintained its sway into the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries, it became increasingly identified with culturally and temporally unmarked styles.

The return of *japonisme* to the history of Asian modernisms is a more recent critical move that transforms the idea of modernism as such. Dislodged from its culturally periodized framework as a designation for twentieth-century American and European experimental writing, "modernism" starts to signify in an expanded geopolitical field as an aesthetically dissonant shuttle between modernity and modernization, nationalism and Westernization, cosmopolitanism and anti-imperialism, individualism and militant collectivism, bourgeois and proletarian culture. It also designates a complex intra-Asian dischronology during the interwar period, which saw the coexistence of "art for art's sake" (typified by the poetry of China's Li Jinfa and Korea's Kim Ok), realism (defined by the Chinese writers Lu Xun and Mao Dun), Japanese "new sensibility writers" (fascinated by the avant-garde New Woman, urban spectacle, and technology), pan-Asian nationalist fiction (Sato Haruo's 1938 *Son of Asia*), and anti-Western, proletarian narratives (by China's Zhao Shuli or Korea's Lin Hua). This heterodox modernism never ended the way modernism in Europe and America arguably did with World War II. For "modernism," in the wake of Deng Xiaoping's 1978 reforms, acquired a second life as a loaded term for the desire for "democracy," avant-garde conceptualism, humanism, structuralism, and "global" imagism. Debates over the meaning of modernism (*xiandai*) were central to 1980s conceptual art practices (*qianwei*) and post-Tiannamen "misty" (obscure) poetry.

The writing of the eccentric, Misty Poet Gu Cheng from the 1970s to the early 1990s epitomizes modernism's generic "drift." According to Eliot Weinberger, Gu Cheng's recapitulation of the gamut of Western modernisms has fomented a new chronotope: "It is extraordinary that Gu Cheng, largely ignorant of Western Modernism—the few poets he knew and admired in translation were Lorca, Tagore, Elytis and Paz—

independently recreated much of the Western literary history of the 20th century. From the Imagism and Symbolism of the early lyrics, he moved on to Dadaism or one of the Futurisms. . . . He ultimately landed in a completely idiosyncratic corner of Surrealism. It is probably safe to say that Gu Cheng was the most radical poet in all of China's 2500 years of written poetry."[20] For Weinberger, Gu Cheng's poetic techniques nucle-ate a new literary world, with the accent here on "world," in the sense of a possible or yet-to-be-apprehended global modernity. One gleans this aesthetic novelty, even without access to the poetry in the original, as an effect of untranslatability. Consider, for example, how modernity is imagined as a new nominalism of capitalism taking shape within an urban phantasmagoria. In a posthumously published "dream sequence" called "City" that layers Chinese literary conceits from Tao to Maoist propaganda slogans, a text titled "Hidden Moon Alley" introduces the odd neologism "Zapitalism," which names the futurism of China's ex-ploding economy:

> No one could get inflamed busy lighting lamps
> Zapitalism flashes down into the depths[21]

The breaks in the middle of the verse lines resemble caesura, yet disre-gard accessible conventions of versification or grammatology. As Joseph R. Allen, one of his English translators, has noted: "As we move into the later poems we sense that the metaphor, epigraphic or extended, can no longer fully represent what is occupying Gu Cheng's mind. In these poems, fragmentation of the language sets in and the tentative logic of syntax and metaphors begins to implode. This is accompanied by his diminishing use of punctuation and the increasing use of the broken and elliptical line structure. . . . Often we sense that we are listening to broken and half-heard conversations; as if we were indeed listening to a dream" (xiv–xv). Though it remains to be seen whether Gu Cheng's particular vision of "Zapitalism" will bequeath future modernisms, his language, built up from imploded line order, non sequitur, and what Allen calls "agglutinative metaphors," names a globality that functions as an Untranslatable for both Asian and Euro-American interpretive traditions. It thus challenges the way in which East-West comparatism is currently written into literary history and throws off the bipolar dy-namic that has one world system competing against another in claiming primacy of first terms.

* * *

How to build a translational humanities responsive to fluctuations in geopolitics, and which intersects with but is not confined to national language frontiers? I have suggested that two grand projects, Cassin's vocabulary of European philosophy and Moretti's monumental study of the novel, stand out as approaches to globality that fully activate the Untranslatable. Their projects have very different stakes; Cassin wants us ultimately to rethink philosophy through translation while Moretti is interested in untranslatability as a goad to generic evolution. But both projects coincide in constituting micro and macro political worldscapes contoured by mistranslation, neologism, and semantic dissonance, and both, not incidentally, involve collaborative labor. Collective authorship, like multiple language learning and off-site academic immersion, becomes one of the more viable ways of experiencing "in-translation" or "*un*translatability" as explosive conceptual practices capable of limning new cartographies of the present.

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NOTES

1   Parag Khanna, "Waving Good-bye to Hegemony," *New York Times Magazine*, January 27, 2008, 37.
2   Preamble to essay by Mike Davis, "Fear and Money in Dubai," *New Left Review* 41 (September–October 2006): 46.
3   Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006).
4   Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 69–82.
5   Peter Osborne, introducing a dossier dedicated to the *Vocabulary* in *Radical Philosophy* 138 (2006): 9.
6   Barbara Cassin, *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies: Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2004), xxi (hereafter cited in text as *VEP*).
7   Etienne Balibar, "Subject," trans. David Macey, included as excerpt from the *Vocabulary* in *Radical Philosophy* 138 (2006): 21.
8   Balibar, "Subject," 28.
9   Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, introduction to questionnaire "In what ways have artists, academics, and cultural institutions responded to the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq?" *October* 123 (2008): 4.
10   Marina Warner, "Commentary," *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 5474 (February 29, 2008): 14.
11   Reprinted in Pierre Bourdieu, *Political Interventions: Social Science and Political Action*, trans. David Fernbach, ed. Thierry Discepolo (London: Verso, 2008), 233.
12   Jacques Rancière, *La mésentente: Politique et philosophie* (Paris: Galilée, 1995).
13   Christopher Prendergast, "The World Republic of Letters," in *Debating World Literature*, ed. Christopher Prendergast (London: Verso, 2004), 14. In the same footnote Prendergast takes aim at the "'incommensurability hypothesis' according to which different cultural systems are mutually unintelligible to one another and thus non-translatable." Jean-François Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne* and *Le Différend* are representative, Prendergast argues,

of the argument "that Western *grands récits* have not merely dominated but effectively annihilated alternative narratives by the simple gesture of refusing their terms" (14).

14   Franco Moretti, "On *The Novel*," preface to *The Novel*, vol. 1, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006), x (hereafter cited in text as *N*).

15   Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History* (London: Verso, 2005), 2 (hereafter cited in text as *GMT*).

16   Worldwide concern over the homogenization of culture, particularly through Hollywood film production and distribution, was expressed in the passage of a UNESCO resolution (October 2005) designed to protect cultural diversity. The convention grants governments permission to use protectionist measures such as quotas or subsidies to mitigate U.S. cultural dominance.

17   Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Guest Column," *PMLA* 120, no. 3 (2005): 719–20.

18   Spivak, *Other Asias* (London: Blackwell, 2008), 212.

19   Spivak, *Other Asias*, 213.

20   Eliot Weinberger, "Diary," *London Review of Books* 23 (2005): 42.

21   *Sea of Dreams: The Selected Writings of Gu Cheng*, trans. Joseph R. Allen (New York: New Directions Books, 2005), 174 (hereafter cited in text).