

‘Ce que l’épidémie nous apprend de la littérature’: World Literature in a Global Pandemic.

A disregard for national borders; a catalyst for anxieties over national identity; transmission through imperceptible forms of contact: the COVID-19 pandemic and world literature have much in common. So much so, in fact, that there has been a rush to trace connections between the two: recent articles include ‘What We Can Learn from the Literature of Past Pandemics?’¹ and the title from which this essay borrows its own, ‘Ce que la littérature nous apprend de l’épidémie’.² These variations on a theme reveal an overwhelmingly unidirectional approach: to look to literature as a source of patterns, lessons and explanations about the current pandemic. Yet what if we were to reverse the direction of this line of enquiry; to look instead at what the spread of pandemics, and the coronavirus pandemic in particular, can tell us about world literature? Rather than force literature into yet another conceptual mould, why not take arguably the most transnational reality in living memory as a lens through which to reframe and question key notions at the heart of the discipline? This comparison is, necessarily, a delimited one. It cannot go any way to encompassing the destructive impact and human cost of pandemics, but must restrict itself to the way they behave: viewing their movement as indicative of wider truths about national, cultural and even academic borders. The field of world literature is already saturated with metaphors; yet few, unlike the current pandemic, have the potential to impact it directly. Tracing the similar structures of patterns and problems in these diverse areas of study does not go far enough: ultimately, we must also look at what the productive similarities, and indeed differences that emerge indicate about the future of world literature in a self-isolating world.

¹ Arden Alexandra Hegele, ‘What We Can Learn from the Literature of Past Pandemics’, *Columbia News*, 7 August 2020, <<https://news.columbia.edu/literature-COVID19-pandemic-narrative-medicine>> [accessed 2 March 2021].

² William Marx, ‘Ce que la littérature nous apprend de l’épidémie’ [What Literatures Teaches Us About the Epidemic], *BCLA* (April 2020) < <https://bcla.org/reflections/ce-que-la-litterature-nous-apprend-de-lepidemie/>> [accessed 2 March 2021].

Of course, it is all too tempting to see not just world literature, but indeed every facet of daily life through the lens of the current pandemic. Constantly surrounded by digital and physical reminders, perhaps it is unsurprising that COVID-19 has filtered through to our cultural activity as well. To justify yet another comparison, then, we must begin by tracing how the spread of the pandemic can be mapped onto the study of world literature. But what do we mean when we say world literature? This, of course, is one of the central questions of the discipline, and could just as easily be asked of COVID-19: what makes it a worldwide experience, or, in scientific terms, a pandemic? To clarify this question, we must take a step back and ask another: what are pandemics and works of world literature before they attain “world” status? According to the stages of disease progression, an epidemic comes before a pandemic; and national literature before world literature. It is certainly tempting to fall into a roughly sketched paradigm of national-literature-as-epidemic and world-literature-as-pandemic; reason enough, perhaps, to view it with caution. After all, a national literature is generally understood as a literature belonging to or claimed by a nation state; an epidemic, on the other hand, is more vaguely defined as an illness affecting ‘a disproportionately large number of individuals *within a population, community, or region* at the same time’,³ implying the potential for an epidemic that is not strictly defined by national borders. An example would be the Naples Plague of 1656-58, a plague epidemic localised in southern regions of the Italian Peninsula.⁴ Epidemics, it would seem, are not limited to national constellations. Yet David Damrosch notes the same conflict in the case of Goethe, widely regarded as the most “canonical” German author, and the originator of the term *Weltliteratur*:

³ ‘Epidemic’ in *Merriam-Webster*, <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/epidemic>> [accessed 5 March 2021], emphasis mine.

⁴ Silvia Scasciamacchia et al., ‘Plague Epidemic in the Kingdom of Naples, 1656–1658’, *Emerging Infectious Diseases*, 18 (2012), 186-188 (p.186).

‘he can’t afford to grant “national literature” too much meaning, since he doesn’t even live *in* a proper nation at all’,⁵ referring to a pre-unified Germany. The same is true of Dante: regarded as arguably the most formative Italian poet and writer, Dante was never Italian in the sense of the modern nation state, but was born in and is associated with the Republic of Florence. Neither of these authors, seen as touchstones of a Eurocentric “canon” of world literature, were in the modern sense of the word ever truly national in the first place. Regarded as the precursors to pandemics and works of world literature, neither epidemics nor national authors and their works are contingent on a stable relationship with the nation state, but exist in and around shifting conceptions of it and its borders.

The next question that follows is: at what point does an epidemic become a pandemic, or a work of national literature one of world literature? This crucial dividing line likewise exposes shared ambiguities. It is often assumed that a pandemic is an epidemic which becomes global; yet what constitutes the global remains unclear. In the case of COVID-19, the WHO did not officially declare a pandemic until 11 March 2020, by which time there were already ‘more than 118,000 cases in 114 countries’,⁶ indicating that the virus had crossed multiple national borders and continents long before it was officially elevated from epidemic to pandemic status. According to the CDC, the Ebola outbreak of 2014-2016 was likewise classed as an epidemic, despite being widespread in numerous countries on the African continent.⁷ Similar questions can be asked of authors belonging to national literatures: how

⁵ David Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), p.8.

⁶ Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, ‘WHO Director-General's opening remarks at the media briefing on COVID-19- 11 March 2020’, WHO, 11 March 2020, <<https://www.who.int/director-general/speeches/detail/who-director-general-s-opening-remarks-at-the-media-briefing-on-covid-19---11-march-2020>> [accessed 5 March 2021].

⁷ ‘History of Ebola Virus Disease’, Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, <<https://www.cdc.gov/vhf/ebola/history/summaries.html>> [accessed 5 March 2021].

many, or more specifically, which borders do their works need to cross before they are seen as belonging to world literature? Authors whose works have circulated in regions of the world deemed “marginal” or “peripheral” according to colonial perspectives were historically far less likely to be included in anthologies of world literature; although fortunately, this is increasingly subject to critical re-evaluation. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak gives the example of Rabindranath Tagore, an extremely influential Bengali poet and writer in the context of multilingual Indian literatures, whose essay Spivak had never heard of in graduate school as ‘it simply wasn’t there in the curriculum’.⁸ There is, of course, a vital difference in the medical distinction between epidemics and pandemics: the upgrade of status carries significant implications for the global health response, and relies on scientific data relating to transmissibility and case numbers. Yet it is helpful in modelling a key nuance of both pandemics and works of world literature, most often focalised through their crossing of national borders: it is not only whether they cross borders, but *which* borders they cross that proves decisive. With regard to literature, this reveals a hierarchisation of such borders from an overwhelmingly Western and Eurocentric perspective, resulting in a skewed perspective of what constitutes the global.

Moving to the other end of the paradigm, we now come to the question: can we equate a pandemic with world literature; and what do the similarities and differences that emerge tell us about both? An obvious qualification to the analogy must first be made. A pandemic involves the simultaneous spread of one disease across the world, albeit with the potential for mutation to occur; the circulation of world literature, on the other hand, encompasses many different literatures that circulate independently of one another and in a multitude of ways.

⁸ David Damrosch and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Comparative Literature/World Literature: A Discussion with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and David Damrosch’, *Comparative Literature Studies*, 48 (2011), 455-485 (p.473).

Indeed, the singular term world literature itself makes a totalizing claim that risks overlooking the plurality of the literatures it encompasses. This analogy, therefore, uses a pandemic merely as a model for the movement of a work of literature into geographic and cultural contexts other than its own. Yet it raises a vital question: if to be a pandemic or a work of world literature is to be coded as global, which we have established is an often skewed, subjective term, does it then follow that it is implicitly universal? One might assume that the spread of the same disease across the world produces a universally shared experience, as argued by Hosam Aboul-Ela in the case of COVID-19:

The quotidian experience of self-quarantining has turned into a uniquely transnational experience [...] we contact relatives on other continents and find them also washing their hands, trying not to touch their faces, and holding to or defying instructions not to leave home.⁹

Transnational seems to be used here as a byword for a common experience that, in transcending national borders, becomes universal to all. Aboul-Ela cites the now all-too-common rituals of hand-washing and lockdown as proof of such universality; yet is this not perhaps shaped by Aboul-Ela's own perspective as an academic writing in the US? His assumption that having access to clean water to wash one's hands is universally available proves problematic in itself; 'instructions not to leave home' likewise vary greatly according to location and disease severity, as a comparison between the currently locked-down UK and practically COVID-19-free New Zealand would indicate. The disputable universality of the pandemic experience echoes similar, and often-repeated deconstructions of the notion of a universal canon of world literature. To take one of the most-cited authors offered as proof of its existence, the example of Shakespeare highlights quite how questionable this argument of

⁹ Hosam Aboul-Ela, 'Nothing is more transnational than a pandemic virus', *BCLA* <<https://bcla.org/reflections/nothing-is-more-transnational-than-a-pandemic-virus/>> [accessed 10 March 2021].

universality is: his works were completely rejected by 18th century French dramatists for abandoning the rigid rules of classicism and neo-classicism, and allowing comedy and tragedy to mingle on stage. Despite the implications of its name, even a pandemic cannot offer a universally identical experience for ‘pan’, ‘all’, and ‘dēmos’, ‘people’; just as we cannot possibly speak of a universal canon of world literature.

The comparison further highlights a shared tension within the criteria we use to define and measure pandemics and works of world literature. Responses in the medical community to the swine flu pandemic of 2009 questioned the ‘elusive’ nature of its definition. Peter Doshi notes an alteration on the WHO’s site on Pandemic Preparedness, ‘the phrase “enormous numbers of deaths and illness” had been removed’,¹⁰ a distinction Daniel Barnett summarises as being ‘between “pandemic” as predominantly a function of geography [...] versus disease severity’.¹¹ Geography versus severity: a tension which is palpable in Damrosch’s definition of the term. Damrosch offers his own conception, ‘I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language’,¹² before agreeing with the cautionary note provided by Guillén: ‘a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture’.¹³ Could Guillén’s use of ‘actively present’ signal that the same distinction is being made here? Between the geographical classification of a pandemic/work of world literature according to circulation beyond its point of origin, versus a classification measured by the severity of its impact: infection and fatality

¹⁰ Peter Doshi, ‘The elusive definition of pandemic influenza’, *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation*, 89 (2011), p.532.

¹¹ Daniel J. Barnett, ‘Pandemic influenza and its definitional implications’, *Bulletin of the World Health Organisation*, 89 (2011), p.539.

¹² Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?*, p.4.

¹³ *Ibid.*

rate in the case of the pandemic, and its ‘active’ participation in a new literary context in works of literature. To return to the example of Shakespeare, do his works gain the status of world literature simply by dint of travel, or due to the fact that they trigger a palpable response in their new literary contexts: Stendhal’s manifesto for doing away with the alexandrine verse in French drama in *Racine et Shakespeare*, for example, or the rich afterlife of what Alexa Huang calls ‘Chinese Shakespeares’?¹⁴ It is not enough simply to cross borders; in order to take hold, pandemics and works of world literature must also establish themselves tangibly in their new contexts.

These dual criteria of geographical circulation and active presence lead us to the interaction of pandemics and works of world literature with national borders, and the obstacles they face moving across them into new geographic and cultural contexts. Yet before we look at the movement of texts themselves, we must first look at theoretical conceptions of the borders and spaces through which they move. As this past year has shown, closing national borders has proved no match for the transmission of the COVID-19 virus; in its early stages, the swift transmission of the virus abroad made clear that for many countries, closing their borders was too little, too late. To turn to Franco Moretti’s metaphor, his remark that ‘waves dislike barriers, and thrive on geographical *continuity*’¹⁵ seems to gesture towards an unbroken perception of space: one through which the various waves of COVID-19 have moved. The uncontainable momentum of the virus as it has moved across national borders seems to model something close to Spivak’s proposition of planetarity in the study of literature: the

¹⁴ Alexa Huang, *Chinese Shakespeares: Two Centuries of Cultural Exchange* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), p.23.

¹⁵ Franco Moretti, ‘Conjectures on World Literature’, *New Left Review*, 1 (2000), 54-68 (p.67).

earth as ‘an undivided “natural” space rather than a differentiated political space’.¹⁶ Spivak distinguishes between the globe as a digitalized, globalized set of borders which presupposes smooth edges and human agency, in contradistinction to the planet as an undifferentiated space we collectively inhabit on loan, and over which we have no control. Surely nothing can prove the illusory nature of a differentiated, controllable globe as aptly as a virus which has spread uncontrollably across the vast majority of the ‘natural’ space of the planet?

There is, however, a slight nuance to be made here. While Spivak seemingly acknowledges that her distinction between globe and planet cannot be entirely binary, ‘the planet [...] is not really amenable to a neat contrast with the globe. I cannot say “the planet, on the other hand”’, elements of her argument seem contradictorily to suggest that the two are, or ought to become mutually exclusive: ‘I propose the planet to override the globe’, and ‘if we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities’.¹⁷ Yet as we have seen from the spread of COVID-19, the two will always exist on a spectrum, and in relation to one another. Having stated that the COVID-19 virus has moved uncontrollably across national borders, we must return to the previous distinction between geography and severity to qualify this: the pandemic may have spread across the ‘natural’ space of the planet, but the political space of the globe has greatly impacted its severity according to location, given nationally-differentiated approaches to containing it. The pandemic, then, offers a helpful real-world model for the planetarity that Spivak proposes for literature studies; with the caveat that it simultaneously demonstrates how the nationally differentiated space of the globe will inevitably exert its influence. Indeed, the concerns raised that the current pandemic likely stems from human intervention in the natural

¹⁶ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p.72.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.72-73.

environment map well onto the eco-criticism often attached to Spivak's proposition of planetarity. The pandemic as a metaphor for planetarity and its tensions, then, offers a helpful first step in conceiving of the types of borders encountered by works of world literature.

The seemingly uncontrollable spread of the COVID-19 virus across national borders begs the question: can borders ever be closed, to viruses as well as to works of literature? A recent paper by Massimiliano Zanin and David Papo outlines the limitations of travel restriction policies as part of the global containment response,¹⁸ which fall down on two important prerequisites: the impossibility of guaranteeing isolation in today's interconnected world, and of imposing a total travel ban in an interdependent world market. The stakes of international connection are exponentially raised in a pandemic scenario: crossing borders not only involves the delivery of lifesaving supplies, as Aboul-Ela points out,¹⁹ but the potentially fatal risk of viral transmission. As Arnold Weinstein puts it, 'paradoxically, pandemics- which restrict touch- nevertheless expose human connection'.²⁰ This interconnection calls to mind another conception of global borders; postulated this time in the field of translation by Emily Apter. Apter offers a conception distinct from Spivak's and Dimock's planetarity: 'oneworldedness [...] envisages the planet as an extension of paranoid subjectivity vulnerable to persecutory fantasy, catastrophism, and monomania [...] held in place by the paranoid premise that "everything is connected"'.²¹ The paranoia at the heart of Apter's definition seems particularly relevant to a global pandemic: inherently and inescapably characterised by

¹⁸ Massimiliano Zanin and David Papo, 'Travel restrictions during pandemics: A useful strategy?', *Chaos: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Nonlinear Science*, 30 (2020) <<https://aip.scitation.org/doi/full/10.1063/5.0028091>> [accessed 15 March 2021].

¹⁹ Aboul-Ela, 'Nothing is more transnational than a pandemic virus'.

²⁰ Arnold Weinstein, 'Our Plague Year: What Literature Tells Us About Pandemics', *Foreign Affairs*, 18 November 2020, <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-11-18/our-plague-year?>> [accessed 2 March 2021].

²¹ Emily Apter, *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (London: Verso, 2013), p.65.

the paranoia of contagion. Indeed, her allusion to ‘persecutory fantasy, catastrophism, and monomania’ does not seem exaggerated when considering the responses of certain world leaders to the spread of the disease. When applying these models of interconnection to works of literature, however, Apter and Spivak seem to treat them as a modern phenomenon. Both focus their descriptions on a modern, globalized, and crucially digital world; overlooking the fact that, as Clio-Ragna Takas argues, ‘much of 14th-17th century literature did travel through an interconnected world [...] the old can be as interconnected and worldly as the “modern”’.²² Just as pandemics have occurred for thousands of years, so too have works of literature historically circulated across the borders of an interconnected world.

This interconnection exposes the real-world factors that impact diseases and works of world literature as they cross borders. John Lynch, writing on interdisciplinarity in epidemiology, poses the question:

Are we yet doing enough to link with other disciplines in understanding the social, psychological, economic, and political factors that more fully explain any robust causal relationships that we find in epidemiological studies and apply that knowledge to effective action?²³

Substituting psychological for cultural, it is precisely these four factors that Gisèle Sapiro identifies as the obstacles faced by literary works when crossing, or failing to cross borders.²⁴ Just as the spread of an epidemic or pandemic is definitively shaped by government response or the relative strength of an economy to provide aid, among other factors, so too is the

²² Clio-Ragna Takas, ‘Renaissance World Makers: World-Desire Before Goethe’, *BCLA* (2020) <<https://bcla.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Renaissance-World-Makers-World-Desire-Before-Goethe.pdf>> [accessed 15 March 2021].

²³ John Lynch, ‘It’s Not Easy Being Interdisciplinary’, *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35 (2006), 1119-1122 (p.1122).

²⁴ Gisèle Sapiro, ‘How Do Literary Works Cross Borders (or Not)? A Sociological Approach to World Literature’, *Journal of World Literature*, 1 (2016), 81-96 (pp.81-82).

circulation of literary works highly dependent on external forces. Unlike a pandemic scenario, however, the obstacles they face come in the form of censorship, a hostile print market, or inadequate distribution networks. It is important to note that such obstacles are not equally distributed. Spivak's remark on the reality that 'borders are easily crossed from metropolitan countries, whereas attempts to enter from the so-called peripheral countries encounter bureaucratic and policed frontiers, altogether more difficult to penetrate'²⁵ holds true for works of literature from these regions, which face a greater struggle to overcome domesticating print and translation markets and assert their status as works of world literature.

To pursue the subject of Lynch's publication, one could even reconfigure this border crossing in another, more figurative form: the boundary crossing of interdisciplinarity. As Marjorie Garber's playful analogies of "'Keep Off the Grass' signs", "'musical chairs'" and the Mad Hatter's table²⁶ helpfully illustrate, the study of literature, and particularly world literature as an academic discipline is inevitably marked by overlapping disciplinary boundaries, leading to the postulation that 'we are always already interdisciplinary'.²⁷ It is precisely this same interdisciplinarity that Lynch identifies in the discipline of epidemiology:

It seems to me that, in significant ways, epidemiology is already an interdisciplinary endeavour [...] It is common and welcome to see the influences of anthropology, medicine, sociology, economics, history, politics, genetics, mathematics, biology, and other disciplines.²⁸

²⁵ Spivak, *Death of a Discipline*, p.16.

²⁶ Marjorie Garber, 'Discipline Envy' in *Academic Instincts* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp.53-59.

²⁷ Ibid., p.73.

²⁸ Lynch, p.1119.

Neither literature, nor pandemics exist in a vacuum; their study, then, cannot ignore inevitable points of overlap with other disciplines. Indeed, the titles cited at the beginning of this essay gesture not only to the interdisciplinarity of epidemics and pandemics, but their crossover with literature specifically; Garber herself points out ‘new formations, like “science and literature” [...] or “medical humanities”’²⁹ among the courses and areas of study now open to students. In doing so, she gestures to something common to both literature and epidemiology: an interdisciplinarity that not only links them, but links them to one another.

Crucially, however, crossing borders has consequences; the act of moving from one national or cultural context to another involves change. Here, the analogy becomes one of mutation: viral mutation in the case of the pandemic, and the mutations that literatures undergo as they travel outside of their original geographic or cultural contexts and are re-interpreted by new ones. Moretti himself specifically refers to this feature of his chosen evolutionary model for literary history, pointing out that ‘evolution includes mutation and selection (i.e. both the production and the elimination of diversity)’.³⁰ While Moretti offers this by way of acknowledgement that he has simplified his evolutionary premise to fit the literary comparison, surely this too can be applied to literature? Works that circulate outside of their original contexts undergo a process of mutation in the adaptations and new interpretations that emerge in their new receiving cultural context. Moretti goes on to acknowledge the limitations of diffusion as a model in this respect: ‘great at explaining how forms move, a theory of diffusion cannot account for how they change’.³¹ It is here that the value of the viral-pandemic-as-model comes to the fore. While like diffusion a pandemic inherently

²⁹ Garber, p.75.

³⁰ Franco Moretti, ‘Evolution, World-Systems, *Weltliteratur*’ in *The Princeton Sourcebook in Comparative Literature*, ed. by David Damrosch, Natalie Melas & Mbongiseni Buthelezi (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), p.402.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.403.

maximises the space occupied by a single disease, it departs from Moretti's model in allowing for the possibility of mutation, encompassing both movement *and* the multiplication of forms as a helpful real-world paradigm for examining how literatures travel and change as they do so.

Just as new variants of the SARS-CoV-2 virus that causes COVID-19 have been identified in locations as diverse as the UK, South Africa and Brazil at the time of writing, so too does literature mutate in new publications and translations as it moves out of its original geographic or cultural context. As Sapiro notes: 'importing a literary work from one national field to another [...] [opens] up a large space for interpretation and strategies of appropriation',³² as demonstrated in the ongoing 'Prismatic Jane Eyre' project. Not only does the project physically map Brontë's work as it mutates into various publications and translations across time and geographical space, currently standing at over 705 acts of translation into 59 languages, but its focus on close reading allows the user to 'investigate cultural difference at the micro level'³³ in the shifting meanings produced by various interpretations of key words such as 'passionate' or 'plain'. Just as a slight error during the replication of a viral genome can produce a mutated form of the virus, so too do individual translation choices produce a subtly but inevitably mutated form of the original work.

Border crossing and the changes it brings with it highlight another shared feature of the spread of pandemics and works of world literature: their role as catalysts for reflecting on national identity. Just as the identity of the nation state is shaped, and even actualised through laying claim to works of national literature as they circulate abroad, so too can a trend

³² Sapiro, p.90.

³³ 'Prismatic Jane Eyre', *Creative Multilingualism & OCCT*, <<https://prismaticjaneeyre.org/close-reading/>> [accessed 15 March 2021].

towards self-definition and self-promotion be seen in the responses of different nation-states to the shared obstacle of a global pandemic. Here, the metaphor must shift somewhat. Works of literature now become analogous not to the spread of the pandemic itself, but rather to means of combatting it: via containment measures and, particularly in the span of the last six months, the production of vaccines. While the primary objective of producing viable COVID-19 vaccines remains scientific, it would seem naïve to overlook the socio-political aims and tensions in which they have become mired. Vaccines have swiftly become politicised: both within the producing nation-state as proof of its scientific advancement, and internationally as a new battleground for existing political tensions. The UK Health Secretary's press release announcing the approval of the Oxford University/AstraZeneca vaccine, for example, uses such explicitly national(ist) terms as 'a moment to celebrate British innovation' and a 'British success story',³⁴ not only announcing but indeed *claiming* this discovery for the nation-state. As the vaccine effort has moved from development to production and supply, its politicisation has shifted to the international stage, with recent conflicts between the UK and EU and talk of a 'vaccine war' read by many as political fallout from Brexit. Indeed, in a recent statement the President of the European Council, Charles Michel, addressed accusations of 'vaccine nationalism' with those of his own, and warned against the offer of vaccines for propaganda purposes by countries such as China and Russia.³⁵ It seems ironic that Michel's warning comes amid a press release emphasising that there would be 'no vaccines without Europe'; the race to develop, produce and supply

³⁴ 'Press Release: Second COVID-19 vaccine authorised by medicines regulator', Department of Health and Social Care, 30 December 2020, <<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/second-covid-19-vaccine-authorised-by-medicines-regulator>> [accessed 15 March 2020].

³⁵ Charles Michel, 'Press Release: "Impatience with vaccinations is legitimate, but should not blind us," warns President Michel', European Council, 9 March 2021, <<https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/european-council/president/news/2021/03/09/20210309-pec-newsletter-6-vaccines/>> [accessed 15 March 2020].

vaccines seems inextricable from political motive, and the assertion of national and supranational importance.

An identical pattern can be seen in the circulation of texts abroad by nation states. As Sapiro outlines:

For a nation-state, exporting its literature in translation is a sign of its symbolic recognition on the international scene [...] state policies in support of translation may at times be embedded in a broader political strategy [...] to] help improve the image of the country.³⁶

Irvin Wolters gives the example of The Foundation for the Promotion of the Translation of Dutch Literary Works, which he notes ‘constituted a cultural-diplomatic venture’ following an aggressive attempt by the Netherlands to re-establish Indonesia as a Dutch colony, damaging its reputation in Europe; the Foundation aimed to ‘change public opinion, using attractive examples of the national literature to repair this reputation’.³⁷ Here, national identity is not only shaped, but indeed reshaped through the act of circulating works of national literature abroad. Could translation, then, become an equivalent in this analogy to the vaccine as a means of exporting the image of the nation-state? There is, of course, an inherent difference: translation works through linguistic barriers to enable the circulation of literatures outside of their original linguistic contexts; vaccines aim to do the exact opposite, and curb the spread of an epidemic or pandemic. Yet both serve as instruments for the nation state to assert and mould its identity through its influence on the international stage, be it in the promotion of vaccines or literary works in translation.

³⁶ Sapiro, p.84.

³⁷ Irvin Wolters, ‘Exporting the Canon: The Mixed Experience of the Dutch *Bibliotheca Neerlandica*’ in *Translating the Literatures of Small European Nations*, ed. by Jakob Stougaard-Nielsen et al. (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2019), pp.91-108 (p.93).

This can likewise be seen in the assertion of national identity through comparison to an implied Other. In an epidemiological context, this takes the form of attributing nationality to epidemic- and pandemic-scale viruses based on their country of origin; a shorthand for attributing national blame to a viral outbreak, and stirring up xenophobic and racist sentiments in the process. Jamie Saxon points out with regard to COVID-19 ‘the tendency to pathologize a place along with its population and culture [...] COVID-19, despite being a world-scale pandemic, is still referred to as “the Chinese virus” or “the Wuhan flu”’,³⁸ a term consistently used by former US President Donald Trump as recently as a press statement in March 2021. Arnold Weinstein concurs, and like Saxon draws on Susan Sontag to point to the pre-requisites for such a trend, as in the ‘coding’ of syphilis in the late fifteenth century: ‘it was the ‘French pox’ to the English, *morbis Germanicus* to the Parisians, the Naples sickness to the Florentines, the Chinese disease to the Japanese’.³⁹ Indeed, the last global pandemic, the so-called Spanish flu, is still referred to in national terms despite the fact that it is a misnomer. While this latter example is less a case of xenophobic or racist motivation, and rather the result of World War One censorship, the precedent of nationally coding epidemics and pandemics remains clear.

This need to typify, to categorise, to *nationalise* in the sense of attributing national identity can likewise be seen in the spread of literature around the world; albeit with different motives. Works of literature that circulate abroad are not only characterised according to their original geographic or cultural context by the receiving culture, but taken as emblematic of it; proceeding, implicitly, from the assumption that its origins produce only *one* type of

³⁸ Jamie Saxon, ‘Making Meaning of the Pandemic “Through the Lens of Literature”’, *Princeton University News*, 15 May 2020, <<https://www.princeton.edu/news/2020/05/15/making-meaning-pandemic-through-lens-literature>> [accessed 2 March 2021].

³⁹ Weinstein, ‘Our Plague Year: What Literature Tells Us About Pandemics’.

literature. The works of Murakami, for example, are often taken as a prototype for a generalised ‘Japanese literature’, entirely overlooking the fact that, as Murakami himself stated, ‘I was an outsider- a black sheep, an intruder in the world of mainstream, traditional Japanese literature’.⁴⁰ Indeed, to refer to ‘Japanese literature’ in the singular overlooks the multitude of literatures that can be categorised as such. Despite the universality of the themes he explores, Murakami is often unable to escape the pigeonhole of nationality into which he is forced, and from which, ironically, he defines himself as distanced.

Indeed, such conceptions of his writing as being quintessentially ‘Japanese’ have become in effect a self-fulfilling prophecy. An interview with Murakami’s German translator Ursula Gräfe notes that the genre of magical realism with which he is most often associated can now be seen in many current Japanese bestsellers in Europe, ‘the Japanese works that are selected to be translated contribute to reinforcing certain stereotypes about Japan, and to the phenomenon of fetishizing Japanese “culture” through literature’:⁴¹ a product of the selective machine of international translation. This brings us back to the earlier point about translation, and in turn to the selection that Moretti identifies as part of the evolutionary process.

Although a distinction was drawn between translation’s promotion of the spread of a text and a vaccine’s efforts to contain the spread of a virus, this did not take into account the selective nature of the translation machine, based on international market demand. Perhaps the model is not so contradictory after all. In selectively translating works of literature based on a domesticating market demand for national stereotypes deemed to be characteristic and thus

⁴⁰ Deborah Treisman, ‘The Underground Worlds of Haruki Murakami’, *New Yorker*, 10 February 2019, <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/the-underground-worlds-of-haruki-murakami>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

⁴¹ Melissa Sou-Jie Brunnensum, ‘Haruki Murakami and the popularity of Japanese literature’, *Deutsche Welle*, 10 November 2020, <<https://www.dw.com/en/haruki-murakami-and-the-popularity-of-japanese-literature/a-55487870>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

marketable, the translation market curbs the potential for a wider variety of works to be translated. This process of selection produces a body of translated works which caters to the demands of the international literary market, and risks an increasingly homogenised perception of what constitutes world literature.

National coding affects not only which works are translated and marketed, but how they are read. There is a tendency to particularize works of literature and read them as specific to, or emblematic of their national or cultural context as they circulate abroad, even if the ideas they explore are far broader and more universal; just as inherently universal, global pandemics retain their so-called “national” origins even as they spread around the world. As an interview with Murakami recounts: ‘a woman stopped Haruki Murakami in Central Park [...] “Excuse me,” she said, “but aren’t you a very famous Japanese novelist?” [...] “I said ‘No, really I’m just a writer’”.⁴² Murakami not only brushes off the attribute of fame, but the label of nationality, too; he does not wish to be read as Japanese, but simply to be read. The motivations behind such national coding are, of course, different. The (often incorrect) national coding of viruses works to activate xenophobic or racist sentiments, and implicitly abdicate any responsibility for the pandemic by the respective nation state. Particularizing works of literature serves rather to reinforce stereotypes and domesticating views of foreign literatures, asserting the nation’s sense of self from a perceived Other. Yet both reveal a common pattern: the instinctive need to revert to national identity as a way of categorising and *containing*; however futile this effort might be. This gestures to a broader lesson: if we can see the problematic nature of particularizing COVID-19 as the ‘Chinese virus’, then why

⁴² Oliver Burkeman, ‘Haruki Murakami: “You have to go through the darkness before you get to the light”’, *Guardian*, 11 October 2018, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/oct/11/haruki-murakami-interview-killing-commendatore>> [accessed 17 March 2021].

not attempt the reverse in literature? A Karolina Watroba suggests,⁴³ by taking literatures seen as particular and contingent to their cultural contexts and focusing on their broader themes, there is a chance that we can begin to appreciate that all writers belonging to the so-called “universal canon” are rooted in specific cultural concerns; it is merely that they are not *only* read through this narrow lens. The accolade of universality in world literature is not exclusive to a Eurocentric, Western perspective.

Any examination of border crossing, however, must also take into account the contact points that both pandemics and literatures encounter. Here, Mary Louise Pratt’s theory of the contact zone provides a useful starting point for further analysis; not least for the fact that the language she chooses maps particularly well onto an airborne disease such as COVID-19. As Pratt defines it, the contact zone is:

The space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict.⁴⁴

Evocative of a warzone or zone of influence, there is an inherently political resonance to the term ‘zone’; in the current climate, it cannot help but call to mind the more medical, biological sense of the zone of infection. The pandemic has shown that the virus is primarily transmitted through respiratory droplets spread during close contact with an infected person; as such, analysing contact remains key to identifying contact routes and preventing further spread of infection. Just as a pandemic is the product of numerous cases of viral contact and can tell us more about the nature of this contact via infection rates, it is the literature that

⁴³ Karolina Watroba, ‘Spaces of Comparison’ Seminar: Centre and Margins, Hilary Term 2021.

⁴⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008), p.8.

comes out of contact zones which can tell us more about the modes of representation they impose, and how these are appropriated and responded to by the receiving culture. Pratt examines ‘literary texts by writers from colonized places [... who] find they must grapple with European travel literature as they develop ways of representing themselves’, as in the work of Aimé Césaire, to name one example. Works of literature, like a pandemic, testify to the type of contact that produced them; it is in analysing them that the nature of these contact zones, whether medical or socio-cultural, and their effects become clear.

Testing out such a metaphor, however, reveals discrepancies that highlight issues central to Pratt’s theorisation. Chief among them is the asymmetrical power dynamic between cultures that come into contact with one another; asymmetry is key to the ‘relations of domination and subordination’⁴⁵ Pratt explores in the context of slavery and colonialism. To attempt to read this through the lens of a pandemic becomes problematic: the truly asymmetrical power dynamic is not between individuals coming into contact with one another, but rather between the virus and the host it infects. This biological parallel would render the host entirely passive to the virus that infects it; at odds with Pratt’s desire to bring out the perspective of the *contacted*, as well as that of the *contactor*, and afford them an agency she finds lacking in Eurocentric accounts of colonialism. Of course, one could argue that interaction comes in the form of the body’s immune system fighting off the viral infection with antibodies; but this likely risks a generalisation of complex scientific processes that would only serve to weaken the metaphor. It is Pratt’s emphasis on ‘co-presence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices’⁴⁶ that seems key; gesturing perhaps not to the micro contact zone between infected individuals, but a macro zone in which the global population must learn to cohabit

⁴⁵ Ibid., p.7

⁴⁶ Ibid., p.8.

with a virus that it is widely believed will become endemic. Perhaps Pratt's 'interlocking understandings and practices' could be seen on a real-world platform: the new normal of 'co-presence' that comes of living during a pandemic, in effect a continual bio-contact zone with an invading viral force.

This leads us to the conclusion of this essay, which is also a new beginning in itself: where do we go from here? So far we have examined the COVID-19 pandemic alongside world literature in a conceptual sense, without taking into account that they exist alongside one another: the former has had, and will continue to have an impact on the latter. After all, world literature exists in a complex nexus of transmission, translation and circulation, all of which will inevitably be impacted by international restrictions to movement. The distance from a library of known works that formed the backdrop to Eric Auerbach's seminal work *Mimesis* has become the reality for many students of the discipline; following library closures as a result of the pandemic, digital libraries have stepped in to fill the absence. Numerous international literary conferences have been cancelled or moved online; international students on world literature courses have been forced to study remotely, lending a particular resonance to the transnationalism explored in the works they study. If it was not so already, the digital realm is the platform to which world literature and its study, as with the majority of communication forms, seems likely to move. The question, then, seems to be whether this will open up previously closed borders and widen access to works in translation; or emphasise the distance that only tangible, in-person connection and extensive physical libraries can surmount.

And to return to the titles cited at the beginning of this essay, we cannot look to past literature to teach us about this pandemic without considering how future literature will reflect back

upon it. Will the COVID-19 prove a ‘uniquely transnational experience’, as Aboul-Ela argued, leading to a body of works that corroborates the planetarity discussed earlier? It certainly seems that the languages used to talk about it will share much in common. Despite the etymological origins of pandemic, the linguist Georgios Babiniotis has lamented the influx of Anglicisms into Greek as a result of COVID-19.⁴⁷ The same can be seen in German: the Leibniz Institute for the German Language has compiled a list of over 1000 new words that have entered the language during the pandemic, the majority of which Gisela Zifonun argues consist of Anglicisms.⁴⁸ Ultimately, we also face the question as to whether the pandemic will prove a transnational experience which limits literary reflection to linguistically diluted and thematically homogenised forms; or whether it will act as a catalyst to re-examine through literature what it means to be an inhabitant of an increasingly interconnected, vulnerable world.

With Margaret Atwood editing a new version of the *Decameron* and cohorts of isolated students around the world forced to practice Moretti’s ‘distant reading’ literally as well as figuratively, there is no doubt that both the works and the study of world literature will be irrevocably marked by the experience of the pandemic. Yet perhaps the pandemic can also offer a model, albeit an imperfect one, for many of the ways we think about world literature: navigating between geographically continuous and politically differentiated borders,

⁴⁷ Helena Smith, ‘The Greeks had a word for it ... until now, as language is deluged by English terms’, *Guardian*, 31 January 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/31/the-greeks-had-a-word-for-it-until-now-as-language-is-deluged-by-english-terms>> [accessed 19 March 2021].

⁴⁸ Gisela Zifonun, ‘Anglizismen in der Coronakrise’, *Leibniz Institut für Deutsche Sprache*, 3 December 2020, <https://www1.ids-mannheim.de/fileadmin/aktuell/Coronakrise/zifonun_anglizismen.pdf> [accessed 19 March 2021].

provoking anxieties over national identity, mutating into new and unforeseen forms, and challenging our perception of what, if any, boundaries can restrict it.

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