Goethe Meets Baldwin: Notes towards a Comparative Perspective beyond Misappropriation

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I was exposed to the writing of Canadian-born journalist (and, later, politician) Michael Ignatieff, specifically his book *Blood and Belonging: Journeys into the New Nationalism* (1993) while researching my undergraduate honors thesis on Cold War Russian and American satirical fiction (a project that later morphed into my doctoral dissertation and my first book). Like me, Ignatieff is rather skeptical of nationalism, especially chauvinistic ethnic nationalism, and his multinational survey of its effects provided an extremely powerful lens through which my young self could interpret the world. The first half of the 1990s had, after all, been rife with various forms of nationalist conflict, including the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the subsequent Persian Gulf War, the series of wars fought in the former Yugoslavia, the Rwandan Genocide, the First Palestinian Intifada (and the stimulus for and backlash against it), Quebecois separatists nearly winning a second referendum about secession from Canada, the Iraqi Kurdish Civil War, and so many more.

In the absence of the overarching geopolitical rivalry of the Cold War, Ignatieff saw the 1990s being defined by a particular kind of localized/ regionalized conflict: "[W]hat has succeeded the last age of empire is a new age of violence. The key narrative of the new world order is the disintegration of nation-states into ethnic civil war; the key architects of that order are warlords; and the key language for our age is ethnic nationalism" (1993: 5). While cataloguing and lamenting six of the most prominent examples of such nationalistic strife, Ignatieff also wrote about its apparent opposite – cosmopolitanism – in a way that resonated with me powerfully then, and still does today:

Anyone whose father was born in Russia, whose mother was born in England, whose education was in America, and whose working life has been spent in Canada, Great Britain, and France, cannot be expected to be much of an ethnic nationalist. If anyone has a claim to being a cosmopolitan, it must be me. I wish I spoke more languages than I do, I wish I had lived in more nations than I have, and I wish that more people understood that expatriation is not exile: it is merely the belonging of those who choose their home rather than inherit it (ibid: 11).

I spent a good deal of the 1980s sleepless with nightmares about nuclear war. I even wrote to the Soviet embassy at some point in junior high, requesting more information about the nation that ostensibly justified the constant threat of nuclear apocalypse. The multicolored poster I received in return certainly informed me about the population and major exports of the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, but it didn't bring me much clarity about whether these people were my friends or enemies. Partly out of adolescent idealism and partly out of terrified desperation, I gravitated towards any worldview that transcended the predominant binaries of the day. Thus, when I read Ignatieff's words about the possibility of productive expatriation, of choosing rather than inheriting my home, I was hooked.

The idea of defining myself in a way that transcends geographic, cultural, or linguistic boundaries had always appealed to me because I felt like I had grown up largely without such inherent limitations. I came into self-consciousness as a bilingual (and eventually quadrilingual) child of bilingual parents, having lived in both Germany and the United States before starting school. After my parents' divorce, I experienced a binary childhood and adolescence in which I generally spent the school year in one place (Little Rock, Arkansas) and the summer in another (Kansas City, Missouri). Although these two locations are not so radically different from one another in the grand scheme of things, for a ten-year-old trying to navigate the often-turbulent waters of social interaction, the peregrination from one context to the other required (re-)learning a completely different set of social codes every few months. Finally, my early experiences of race and class in Little Rock created a third level of what one might call partial or incomplete integration. My mother and I were unusual white "immigrants" into a lower-middle-class inner-city neighborhood undergoing "white flight" in the late 1970s, and I was part of the racial minority at almost every school I attended from 1978 to 1990. Rather than seeing these various layers of liminality as barriers to belonging (and, frankly, having had the privilege of ultimately not needing to assimilate in order to belong) within the various societies in which I have lived, I have come to think of them instead as the stimulus for the per-

spective with which I have tried to view the world, personally and professionally.

When I started graduate school in 1995 and began in earnest my professional development as a literary scholar, I had a relatively simplistic understanding of how and why ideals like multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism might become a part of my critical perspective. If nothing else, they provided a political/philosophical explanation for why I was drawn to writing from countries to which I had not yet traveled, and by writers from ethnic, racial, and national backgrounds different from my own. They also aligned with my desire to produce scholarship that challenged the conventional critical wisdom about such things as the ostensible anti-Americanism of leftist writers during the 1930s (the subject of my MA thesis), or the inherently binary nature of the Cold War (the subject of my doctoral dissertation). Cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism seemed like the perfect antidotes to the ethnocentric bigotry and/or nationalistic provincialism regularly expressed during the 1990s by such "culture warriors" as Pat Buchanan, William Bennett, and Harold Bloom. Although I felt neither internal desire nor external pressure to reject my identity as a white man or as an American citizen of German national/cultural heritage, I also knew that I did not want those aspects of my identity to overdetermine the literature about which I could write. Using Ignatieff's words as my manifesto – "Cosmopolitans made a positive ethic out of cultural borrowing: in culture, exogamy was better than endogamy, and promiscuity was better than provincialism" (ibid: 11) – I pronounced myself a cosmopolitan multiculturalist and set out to culturally borrow whatever struck my fancy in constructing my scholarly identity!

Hold on, hold on … Before you decide to set that well-intentioned but horribly naïve version of me straight about privilege and appropriation, let me assure you that I have been fortunate to have several wise (and patient) friends, mentors, and colleagues in my life that have already undertaken that unenviable task. Thanks to their interventions, I not only processed the entirety of Ignatieff's comments about cosmopolitanism (rather than just cherry-picking the parts that best suited my desired self-image …), but also began to develop a more nuanced understanding of how to teach and to write critically about a wide range of literary works while remaining cognizant of the cultural and social power dynamics in which such interpretive acts take place.

The notion of being a scholar of "world literature" initially struck me as fairly uncomplicated. For longer than I care to admit, I thought that being a scholar of world literature was as simple as stepping outside the traditional American literature and British literature "tracks" of study available to most undergraduate English majors in the United States at that time. Not only had the

broader implications of reading works in translation rather than in their original language not occurred to me yet, but I was also wholly unfamiliar with Goethe's 19th century concept of *Weltliteratur* – to say nothing of related concepts put forth by Diogenes, Immanuel Kant, Homi Bhabha, Franco Moretti, Judith Butler, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and Paul Gilroy, just to name a few (the waters of my undergraduate education had not been particularly muddied by post-colonial theory, as you might have guessed …). I had considered enrolling in Comparative Literature instead of English for my doctorate at the University of North Carolina, but ultimately rejected that option because it seemed more predicated on linguistic comparisons than on the thematic ones in which I was primarily interested. Studying world literature – at least in my conception of it at the time – would allow me to glean knowledge found in works from other cultures and incorporate it into my own. What I imagined as the result of such study was a cosmopolitan intellect comparable to a World's Fair, with as many cultures as possible represented by at least a single exemplar in their respective pavilions.

With time and experience, the unsavory aspects of this metaphor have become clear to me. I recognized, for example, that every nation's opportunities for self-representation within a World's Fair were constrained by the values and desires of the society hosting those exhibits (e.g., the absence of a Soviet exhibit from the 1964-65 New York World's Fair). Every work of literature exists wholly independent of my (or any other critic's) desire to reframe it from my own vantage point. Such acts of reframing are understandable, since every reader is a unique individual who invariably brings his or her own background to a given text. An excess of cosmopolitan or multicultural zeal, however, can un-wittingly appropriate a text by downplaying or otherwise erasing its cultural origins; Such a process is equally onerous and damaging when it arises from a desire to define a canon of ostensibly universal "Great Books," and when it stems (as it did with me) from the desire to transcend cultural distinctions in favor of an overarching humanism.

Thankfully, James Baldwin had left a trail of breadcrumbs that would eventually lead me to a better practice. I had read a considerable bit of Baldwin's writing as an undergraduate and had appreciated him both as a stylist and a contrarian, but it was not until years later that I understood what I now see as his profoundly necessary (and as-yet largely unheeded) advice to white people who wish to stop perpetuating and benefitting from America's racism. As anyone who has read even one of his works must surely recognize, Baldwin pulls few punches when it comes to speaking his mind about the causes of racism in America. As I revisited *Another Country*, *The Fire Next Time*, and various others

of his occasional pieces, I started to notice that Baldwin calls out not just overt white supremacists like "Bull" Connor and James Eastland, but also white liberals who revel in the putative correctness of their attitudes while remaining ignorant of the ineffectuality or even harmfulness of their (in-)actions:

People talk to me absolutely bathed in a bubble bath of self-congratulation. I mean, I walk into a room and everyone there is terribly proud of himself because I managed to get to the room. It proves to him that he is getting better. It's funny, but it's terribly sad. It's sad that one needs this kind of corroboration and it's terribly sad that one can be so self-deluded. The fact that Harry Belafonte makes as much money as, let's say, Frank Sinatra, doesn't really mean anything in this context. Frank can still get a house anywhere, and Harry can't. People go see Harry and stand in long lines to watch him. They love him onstage, or at a cocktail party, but they don't want him to marry their daughters. This has nothing to do with Harry; this has everything to do with America (Baldwin 1964: 74).

Baldwin wrote those words in 1964, but I felt their relevance in 1996 as much as I still feel it in 2017. When I hear presumably idealistic rhetoric that seeks to "raise awareness" or "promote tolerance" by studying literary works by members of "marginalized" or "historically underrepresented" groups, I almost invariably feel myself soaking in the metaphorical "bubble bath" of which Baldwin speaks. Although noble-sounding, these goals ultimately retain the inherent "othering" of such literatures and the authors who created them, much as cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism often retain a quasi-colonialist subjective privilege. They do nothing to dismantle or even to question the social hierarchy of power that dispatches Baldwin, Belafonte, Toni Morrison, and Percival Everett (to name a few) to the category of "black" artist, whether or not they wish to claim that label (and the presumptions that accompany it).

Had I read Ignatieff more attentively back in 1993, I would have noticed that he warned himself (and me) of the potential for privileged self-delusion that exists within cosmopolitanism:

What has happened in Bosnia must give pause to anyone who believes in the virtues of cosmopolitanism. It is only too apparent that cosmopolitanism is the privilege of those who can take a secure nation-state for granted. […] [C]osmopolitans like myself are not beyond the nation; and a cosmopolitan, post-nationalist spirit will always depend, in the end, on the capacity of nation states to provide security and civility for their citizens.[…] At the very least, cosmopolitan disdain and astonishment at the ferocity with which people will fight to win a nation-state of their own is misplaced. They are, after all, only fighting for a privilege [that] cosmopolitans have long taken for granted (1993: 13-14).

Ignatieff claims (rightly, I believe) that what has long been celebrated as the open-mindedness of cosmopolitanism is actually a sheltered viewpoint that results from perceiving one's own relative security as a norm to which others would reasonably aspire. The political-cultural philosophy of American exceptionalism is wholly predicated on such a perception, as is white supremacy; Both protect the ostensibly natural "rights" of the favored nation/race with great violence, figurative and literal.

Overly simplistic diversity rhetoric that espouses "color-blindness" or a "post-racial" mindset relies on a similar self-delusion that willfully ignores the persistence of systemic inequalities that are not addressed meaningfully by such concepts. As Baldwin puts it in *The Fire Next Time* (1963), "White Americans find it as difficult as white people everywhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic value that black people need, or want" (108). I am not suggesting that extant discourses of cosmopolitanism and diversity are the ethical equivalents of chauvinistic nationalism and white supremacy, but rather that they are perhaps less of a remedy than I (and others) have presumed them to be.

Baldwin's complaint about white Americans' response to racism tellingly echoes Ignatieff's indictment of cosmopolitanism:

Most people guard and keep; they suppose that it is they themselves and what they identify with themselves that they are guarding and keeping, whereas what they are actually guarding and keeping is their system of reality and what they assume themselves to be. One can give nothing whatever without giving oneself – that is to say, risking oneself. If one cannot risk oneself, then one is simply incapable of giving. And, after all, one can give freedom only by setting someone free. This, in the case of the Negro, the American republic has never been sufficiently mature to do. White Americans have contented themselves with gestures that are now described as "tokenism." […] [T]he sloppy and fatuous nature of American good will can never be relied upon to resolve hard problems (ibid: 100-101).

The institutionalized forms of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism in which I have participated as a scholar and teacher of world literature are far from immune to charges of "tokenism," so I take Baldwin's accusations of "sloppy" and "fatuous" practice to heart. Fortunately, he also offers a provocative solution that can form the basis for a pedagogical and scholarly praxis that moves beyond such superficiality:

The only way [the white man] can be released from the Negro's tyrannical power over him is to consent, in effect, to be black himself, to become part of that suffering and dancing country that he now watches wistfully from the heights of his lonely power and, armed with spiritual traveller's checks, visits surreptitiously after dark (ibid: 110).

This act of "consent[ing] […] to be black" is importantly distinct from the more touristic impostures that pervade brands of cosmopolitanism and/or multi-culturalism that refuse to acknowledge and to step outside the presumption of "security and civility" that Ignatieff mentions. It goes well beyond the temporary empathy of "walking a mile in the shoes" of the putative Other, a non-binding performance of "risking oneself" that always allows the subject to return to the sanctity and safety of his or her starting point:

[W]hen we talk about what we call "the Negro problem" we are simply evolving means of avoiding the facts of this life. Because in order to face the facts of a life like Billie [Holliday]'s or, for that matter, a life like mine, one has got to – the American white has got to – accept the fact that what he thinks he is, he is not. He has got to give up, he has got to surrender his image of himself, and apparently this is the last thing white Americans are prepared to do (Baldwin 1964: 74).

It is this act of "surrender" of one's self-image that I believe can transform the study of literature from individuals and nations different from oneself from a shallow tokenism into a meaningful act of humanist solidarity. I do not believe that such "surrender" requires either negation of one's identity or uncritical acceptance of the values of all other cultures, the two anxieties that seem to trouble multiculturalism's fervent opponents within and outside academe. It does, however, require a difficult and potentially uncomfortable process of discarding the presumption that what is important or desirable in others is defined solely by what is either "universal" or in some other way comprehensible through the lens of one's own existence; In Baldwin's terms, one must be willing to drop the "guard" on one's "system of reality" for more than just a fleeting moment. Metaphorically speaking, it means disembarking from the air-conditioning, plush seats, and tinted windows of the tourist-bus and "risking oneself" among the locals on their own terms as much as possible.

In his *The Idea of World Literature: History and Pedagogical Practice* (2006), John Pizer articulates a scholarly and pedagogical model that squares with Baldwin's ideas without referring to them directly. Pizer begins by stating his belief "that one of the fundamental desiderata of a World Literature course should be the inculcation of an *appreciation* for the nuances of alterity, of a

belief that life and literature outside the United States are inscribed by unique linguistic/cultural matrices perhaps no longer defined at the national level, but capable of being glimpsed through the filter of the subnational-transnational dialectic" (2006: 15, original emphasis). He claims that this "filter" originates with Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur,* which Pizer asserts is "imbued by a strong openness to […] the cultural and linguistic Other. It is temporally oriented toward the future rather than the past" (ibid: 110). Pizer spends the remainder of his book tracing the historical development from that foundation to a contemporary metatheoretical pedagogy of world literature that would "educate beginning students in the complex diversities of the globe's cultures while concomitantly highlighting their universal elements" (ibid: 94).

From my own perspective, one of the most useful expressions of this "subnational-transnational dialectic[al]" approach is Pizer's application of soci-ologist Roland Robertson's theory of "glocalization" to the practice of literary study. Pizer not only expands on Goethe's ideas, but also on those of David Damrosch, whose *What Is World Literature?* (2003) remains a core text for contemporary scholars seeking to extricate the practice of *Weltliteratur* from the culture wars' obsession with canonical *Wertliteratur* ("worthy literature"). Pizer summarizes Damrosch's "ideal reading" practice as simultaneously "driven by a pleasure in the difference of foreign works from one's contemporary cultural framework, a gratification in their similarity, and an exploration of 'what is *like-but-unlike* – the sort of relation most likely to make a productive change in our own perceptions and practices'" (ibid: 84). Pizer acknowledges that both the un-avoidable loss of nuance that accompanies translation and the inherent difficulty of acquiring native proficiency in foreign languages/cultures tend to constrain the study of "the universalities and particularities of human experience that can be gleaned and critically pondered from all worthwhile texts" to a "nodding, indeed superficial, acquaintance" (ibid: 109). However, he also believes that:

a *Weltliteratur*-driven reading of contemporary "glocalized" literature must mediate among national, local, and universal contexts of place. Such a reading must show how discrete localities are imaginatively but realistically linked and transformed through discursive networks enabled by contemporary telecommunication technologies. This "two-dimensional" reading will indicate where the global and local are enmeshed, but will also demonstrate where the processes of globalization and uniformity are resisted and contested (ibid: 118).

If this complex "mediat[ion]" among different layers of context can be accomplished without presuming either the particular or the universal to be a desirable norm, then Baldwin's necessary act of self-surrender remains possible.

By inclination and by later training, I am a comparatist; As such, I value the inclusively dualistic perspective fostered by both cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism at their ethical best. I encourage my students to interpret literature stereoscopically, to see the "global" with the left eye and to see the "local" with the right. I also strive to achieve such a perspective in my daily life and in turn to apply it to both my teaching and my scholarship. By doing so, I hope to navigate between an interpretive Scylla and Charybdis. On one side, we find overly simplistic readings that merely "honor" or "sample" local variations without also seeking to understand how and why they matter to a text's reception outside its originating culture; On the other resides a canonizing impulse that assigns value to a work exclusively on the basis of its potential to transcend spatial and temporal borders. The narrow path between these two options involves remaining receptive to the unfamiliar without prejudging it – either positively or negatively – because of its alterity. In this way, the Other ceases to be defined either in opposition to the Self or as a desirable exoticism to be appropriated into it; Instead, both Self and Other become voices within a grand-scale and often halting conversation whose cognates, untranslatables, neologisms, and double-entendres all demand consistently mindful interpretation.

I am a white American, both by the accident of my birth and by my acculturation over the course of more than four decades. Because of the privileges it affords me, I strive to ensure that this identity is *only* the starting point for my subsequent investigations. There is *nothing* about my own experience of being American (or white, or male, or Southern, or second-generation German American, or any other group identity marker) that is definitive in terms of American-ness, even if many aspects of it are relatively representative. The first step towards a productively cosmopolitan surrender of the privileged self is to drop the presumption that any part of my identity – whether assigned, assumed, or insisted-upon – must invariably prescribe my relationship to others and vice-versa. As I tell my students, each of us can bring his or her personal experiences and values to bear productively on a text, provided that those experiences do not become a source of confirmation bias that imparts rigid expectations about what kind of literature is worthy of attention or exertion.

Instead of adopting the unchallenging cultural relativism that afflicts much of contemporary cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, I have tried to adopt a "relativity of diversity" that incorporates the aforementioned ideas of Ignatieff, Baldwin, Goethe, and Pizer. Einstein redefined each individual's position in the

physical cosmos by noting that the universe *inherently* appears different depending on the condition of the observer – a fact that comments neither on the intrinsic value of the observer, nor on that of the universe. Transmuted into literary terms, such a viewpoint seeks to understand how the idiosyncratic conditions of the observer (writer and/or reader) affect the universe (the written about), and to encourage constant inquiry into the changing nature of both the observer and the observed. If I have done my job well, my students or readers will become aware of how each new experience they incorporate into themselves fundamentally disrupts any inflexible or essentialist aspects of identity, but without eradicating that identity in the process. I do not cease being a white man of German American cultural background because I read and write about novels by Gish Jen, Colson Whitehead, Jhumpa Lahiri, or Sherman Alexie, but with each passing expansion of worldview, any potential rationalizations for either the superiority of this background or its incompatibility with others become increasingly untenable and, hopefully, undesirable. I have no wish to tell others who or what they should be, but I aspire to use discussions of literature to ask questions about the ways in which both individuals and groups make (and recognize) these distinctions to begin with. In the end, I seek means of interconnecting the otherwise disparate dots of humanity as possible without homogenizing them in the process.

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