

Literary Study as Glocalization

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ABSTRACT

Literary study combines the local and the global in a way that might be called "glocalization." Literary theory is apparently global, though it always has local features, while the cultural assumptions of literary works are often clearly local. This makes difficulties for the understanding of works not from one's own culture. The kiss at the end of Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* is a good example. A number of hypothetical explanations may be proposed for why that kiss brings the heroine to decide to return to her bad husband, but the novel does not unequivocally support any of them. This undecidability about the causes of a decision arises from the disjunction between cognition and performative language or act.

KEY WORDS

intertextuality
literary theory
glocalization
The Portrait of a Lady
speech acts

cultural difference
local culture
Henry James
kissing



Literary study in an age of globalization mixes the global and the local. On the one hand, literary theory tends to make universal claims for the adequacy of its formulations and methodologies. This is true even though each theory has been developed within a particular local culture. Theory travels. It can be translated. On the other hand, literary works in whatever language tend to be singular, particular, *sui generis*, tied to a particular historical time and to a particular local culture. Literary works resist traveling. They resist translation. Literary study, in its necessary mixture of theory and close reading, combines the local and the global in a way that might be called “glocalization.” These days, the study of “world literature” (another name for “literature in the context of globalization”) is being vigorously revived as a concomitant of globalization. This raises the question of the degree to which a work from one culture can be understood or accounted for by those who dwell within a different culture.

Let me exemplify this problem by way of a discussion of Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* (1880; revised 1908). This is one of the canonical masterpieces of modern English and American literature. A recent widely-circulated film was based on it, but I dare say some readers of this essay have not read it. This is an exemplification of the problem of globalized literary studies I am discussing. Here is a brief synopsis. Isabel Archer, an intelligent, imaginative, and beautiful American orphan girl of marriageable age, is taken by her Aunt Lydia first to England and then to Italy from her home in a provincial American city, Albany, New York. She has already refused a proposal of marriage from an American suitor, Caspar Goodwood. In England she refuses a proposal from Lord Warburton, a rich and attractive English nobleman. She refuses both Goodwood and Lord Warburton several more times in the course of the novel, but inexplicably accepts the

proposal of a “sterile aesthete,” an impecunious, bigoted, selfish expatriate American who lives in Florence, Gilbert Osmond. Osmond admires Isabel’s beauty. He wants to add her to his collection of rare things. He also wants the fortune that has been willed to her by her uncle, Aunt Lydia’s husband, at the instigation of their mortally ill son, Ralph Touchett, also in love with Isabel. Isabel’s marriage is miserably unhappy. She disobeys her cruel and obnoxious husband’s express injunction and returns to England to be at the deathbed of her dying cousin. After his death she remains in indecision, not knowing which way to turn. Caspar Goodwood turns up again, proposes that they should run off together, and, taking her in his arms, kisses her. The kiss precipitates Isabel’s decision to return to Rome and her malignant husband. The novel ends with her departure from London.

How possible is it for those who have grown up, for example, within Chinese culture to understand *The Portrait of a Lady* rightly? Does James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* travel? It seems to depend so intimately both on traditional literary conventions and on cultural conventions as to be difficult to understand for someone outside those conventions. The same question can be asked from the other direction. How possible would it be for me, even if I were to learn Chinese, to come to understand a given masterwork of Chinese literature, for example the eight poem sequence by Du Fu, “Autumn Stirrings”?¹ As an outsider to Chinese culture, how could I hope to master those poems and the extensive commentary written about them over the centuries? I might not even be able to comprehend the nuances of the word in the title translated as “stirrings.”

Almost the last thing that happens in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* is Caspar Goodwood’s kiss of Isabel. The whole novel leads up to that kiss as its climax. The novel might have been called “The Story of a Kiss.” This climactic kiss is the last of a long line of kisses in the novel, many of them between women. All these kisses function as efficacious speech acts, or rather as mute gestures that stand in place of speech acts. A kiss is a way of doing things not with words but with signs. There is nothing particularly against standard speech act theory in saying this. J. L. Austin in *How to Do Things with Words* allows for

the possibility of such wordless words.

Caspar Goodwood's kiss of Isabel takes its place not only as the last of the long line of kisses in *The Portrait of a Lady*, but also in the context of the tradition in Western culture making kisses a form of greeting, whether a kiss on the cheek or a kiss of the other's hand; an act of obeisance, as when the Catholic believer kisses the Pope's ring; a way to seal a compact; a way of saying yes, or of making a promise, or of taking responsibility, as when the bride and groom kiss as a signal that the marriage ceremony is complete and that the couple is now lawfully free to kiss and to consummate the marriage. A kiss may be an act of magically asserting religious fidelity and appealing to God, a form of prayer, as when a believer kisses the Torah, or the Bible, or the toe of Michelangelo's *Pietà* in Saint Peter's in Rome.

Here is the kiss in *The Portrait of a Lady*. The section in brackets was added in the 1908 revision:

He glared at her a moment through the dusk, and the next instant she felt his arms about her and his lips on her own lips. [His kiss was like white lightning, a flash that spread, and spread again, and stayed; and it was extraordinarily as if, while she took it, she felt each thing in his hard manhood that had least pleased her, each aggressive fact of his face, his figure, his presence, justified of its intense identity and made one with the act of possession. She had heard of those wrecked and under water following a train of images before they sink. But when darkness returned she was free.] She never looked about her; she only darted from the spot. There were lights in the windows of the house; they shone far across the lawn. In an extraordinarily short time—for the distance was considerable—she had moved through the darkness (for she saw nothing) and reached the door. Here she only paused. She looked all about her; she listened a little; then she put her hand on the latch. She had not known where to turn; but she knew now. There was a very straight path.²

Why does Caspar's kiss tell Isabel that she must return to her odious husband and to a miserably unhappy marriage? On what basis does Isabel make a life-long decision to immure herself again in her husband's house? Why is it that Caspar's kiss gives her the knowledge that she did not have before? All that precedes in the novel ought to answer these questions. In order to see if it does, it would be necessary to read that context with care, for the knowledge it gives. It would be necessary, that is, to read the novel.

The restricted space of this essay does not permit doing that. It would involve a discussion in detail of all the decisions Isabel has made prior to this one, the decision to accept her Aunt Lydia's invitation to accompany the latter to Italy, the various refusals of repeated proposals by Caspar Goodwood and Lord Warburton, and the decision to accept Osmond's proposal. Isabel's acceptance of her aunt's invitation is expressed not as a promise but as the mention of a promise: "And yet, to go to Florence, [. . .] I'd promise almost anything!" (1: 35). In all these cases the moment of decision is skipped over. It is a blank place in the narration. This systematic non-presentation of Isabel's crucial moments of decision, the moments that would seem most dramatic, most important, and most in need of representation, seems to me exceedingly peculiar and in need of explanation. It is perhaps the thing most requiring explanation in this novel.

In the prior context of these determining decisions Isabel, at the very end of the novel, turns from Goodwood and starts for Rome and Osmond. Just why, then, does Isabel go back to Osmond? Several incompatible answers are suggested by the text. The three chief possible explanations given in the novel correspond in one way or another to the reigning modes of explanation within Western literary study these days: (1) textual or linguistic; (2) psychoanalytic; (3) cultural.

1. Isabel says explicitly more than once that marriage vows are sacred and that she owes allegiance to her husband even though he is a "fiend," as Caspar calls him. She is, one reading might argue, bound by language, that is, the promises and vows she has uttered. As Madame Merle says to Isabel on another occasion, "How much you think of your promises!" to

which Isabel responds, "I think a great deal of my promises" (1: 24-25). Isabel, according to this reading, has the kind of presumably admirable moral rectitude or "conscience," as Ralph calls it, that considers itself bound by speech acts and acts in accordance with vows made in the past. Kant in the *Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals* considers the keeping of promises, like not telling lies, the basis of morality. Nietzsche thinks the same in *The Genealogy of Morals*. James seems to belong to this tradition.

2. Though the novel does not exactly say so, it could be argued, in a quite different reading, that Isabel is afraid of Caspar's masculine power. Many critics have taken this tack. Isabel has been attracted to Osmond because he is so little threatening sexually. She has, such a reader might argue, a deep distaste for, or fear of, heterosexual sex. This distaste, it may be, reflects James's own and cannot of course be spoken directly.
3. Ralph, however, in the last interview between him and Isabel, just before he dies, offers yet a third explanation for Isabel's decision to return to Osmond, in this case a cultural one: "I always understood," he says, "though it was so strange—so pitiful. You wanted to look at life for yourself—but you were not allowed; you were punished for your wish. You were ground in the very mill of the conventional!" (2: 415). Is this the last word? Who or what, exactly, did not allow it? Who or what punished her for her wish?

Why does Isabel take promises so seriously? Well, the reader might argue, she has a big New England conscience. She wants to do her duty when she can find one to do. This ideologeme contradicts the contrary American love of limitless liberty, which Isabel also embodies. Her tragedy or her "fate" (James's word in the preface, when he says he wanted to see what Isabel would *do*, what would be her fate), could be said to be determined by the clash or contradiction between these two ideals, both deeply embedded in American culture then as now. In Isabel's case, keeping promises wins out over the desire for infinite freedom and disposibility. Why? What possible good can there be in

deciding to stick to a decision, commitment, or promise that turns out to have been made on the basis of false interpretation, a bad reading, a terrible epistemological error? The answer might be phrased in various ways.

1. It is the necessarily mistaken decision (since you never know enough when you decide) that puts Isabel in a new position, namely a position to be able to find out the truth about Osmond. It is out of loyalty to the blind performative that made new knowledge possible that Isabel sticks to her promise to love and obey Osmond, even when she knows that he is an egotist and that he hates her, hates her more and more.
2. Sticking to her promise to Osmond is, for James, for the narrator, and for Isabel, to avoid confronting the fact that selfhood is "*ondoyant et divers*," as Montaigne put it. The self has no solid basis in a perdurable, pre-existing and indestructible selfhood. Selfhood is created and created anew from moment to moment by speech acts. This would mean that a new decision would give you a new self, for example if Isabel had been false to her solemn marriage vows and run off with Caspar Goodwood. Caspar's kiss rather precipitates the reverse result. That decision saves her (and perhaps the reader) from learning that selfhood is unstable.
3. Renunciation, for James, is, for some mysterious reason, the highest virtue. It certainly runs through all his novels, for example in Maggie's renunciation of her privileges as an injured wife, in *The Golden Bowl*, or in Strether's returning to Woollett, Massachusetts, in *The Ambassadors*, because he does not want to have got anything out of it for himself. All James's fiction tells tales of renunciation and loss.
4. James is a sadist or Isabel a masochist. She takes pleasure in suffering or in making herself suffer.

Perhaps the best of these hypothetical explanations is the one that rests on a particular working out of the *aporia* between cognitive and performative utterances. You cannot know, James seems to be saying, without deciding, without committing yourself, irrevocably. However,

since your commitment or decision, which constitutes a promise to be faithful to your choice, is necessarily blind, made in ignorance, it is almost certain to be a big mistake, unless you just happen to be very lucky. Once you have committed yourself, there is no going back to your responsibility, your unused freedom, and what was in a sense your irresponsibility. Nevertheless, just as Maggie's renunciation of her privilege to complain as an injured wife, in James's *The Golden Bowl*, is the most powerful, the cruelest revenge she can take on Charlotte and on her husband, so the cruelest thing Isabel can do, it might be argued, is to return to Osmond, to remain faithful to him, since he hates her so as a reproach to his whole way of life.

Though I have given a number of plausible explanations of why Caspar's kiss gives Isabel the knowledge she needs to decide to return to Osmond, I end by formulating the impossibility of verifiable judgment or decision by the reader in this case. The novel does not tell the reader enough to confirm a reading. It leaves the reader unable to understand Isabel's decisions, therefore unable, if the reader does not import something from outside the text, to pass judgment on her decision as good or bad. I return to that kiss. The kiss, James says, gives Isabel knowledge. It tells her that she must return to Osmond. Why it tells her that, however, the novel does not say. The reader is free, of course, to bring in explanations from earlier in the novel, as I have done in the hypothetical explanations I have proposed, or to import explanations from other works by James, or from the surrounding culture, or from James's psychological makeup as we can figure that out from the evidence we have.

There are two problems with doing any form of that, however. One is that the possible explanations provided from earlier passages or from elsewhere are contradictory and diverse. They do not make a coherent system. It is logically inconsistent to have all these reasons at once, and yet textual citations can be made to support them all. They constitute a genuinely "undecidable" reading situation, a non-systematic system of incompatible possible readings that the text may be cited to support.

The other reason forbidding a judgment based on the text is that

the description of the kiss says nothing definitively supporting any of them or authorizing a choice among them. Why Isabel decides, just what knowledge she gets, remains a secret. The text does not provide a textual basis on which to form a judgment, neither a constative one (asserting in so many words that this or that knowledge is why she decided that way) nor a performative one ("I declare she did right [or wrong]"), asserted by the narrator or even by Isabel or by some other character.

It is not an accident or an oversight that the narrator (or James himself) does not tell the reader, elides essential information, or keeps the secret. He cannot in principle, however much he might want to do so, given the presuppositions that the novel exemplifies about decision, knowledge of the other and of oneself, tell how a performative (Caspar's words "Trust me," followed by a kiss that is an "act of possession") leads to knowledge. The movement from the one to the other is in principle unknowable. The two are incommensurable. It is not a matter of causation, with the performative causing the knowledge in some direct intelligible line. The reader can fill the hiatus, the elision, the gap, with all sorts of unverifiable hypotheses, but no textual authority can be cited for affirming any one of them over the others, though it is impossible, logically, to have them all.

This failure of knowledge is parallel to the way James in the preface cannot or will not tell the reader where he got the inspiration for Isabel and the other characters, and parallel also to the lack of explanation of why Isabel refused Caspar and Warburton; it is parallel, finally, to Isabel's inability to explain to Caspar, to Aunt Lydia, or to Ralph why she accepted Osmond in the first place. In all these cases, for the writer, the narrator, the character, and the reader, the basis of decision is hidden. These cases are examples of those true secrets that cannot ever be revealed and about which nothing decisive can be verifiably said, not even that they exist. That, however, does not prevent decisions from being made, nor even prevent us from saying that they ought to be made, must be made, nor does it prevent the reader from taking upon himself or herself the responsibility for filling in the gap between the kiss and the knowledge that follows it with one or another of the ex-

planations I have proposed. That is your decision, but you are on your own in making it, just as you are in making any decision.

I return to my initial question: How much of what I have said in explanation of Caspar's kiss of Isabel is based on literary theory that is translatable because it is universal, and how much is based on local cultural assumptions that are hard to translate because they are tacit assumptions, "local knowledge" that is difficult, perhaps impossible, to put into general, universal, "globalized" terms? The answer is that the local always contaminates the global. I have used speech act theory, for example. Speech act theory makes universal claims. It can be expressed in abstract generalizations about how language or other signs are used, not to name some state of affairs but to make something happen. Each given case of that, for example, Isabel's promises or her refusals of marriage proposals, or Caspar's kiss of Isabel, is, however, so intimately bound up in local conditions and assumptions that someone outside European and American culture might have great difficulty assessing the speech act and deciding whether or not it is "felicitous," that is, efficacious in doing something with words or other signs.

The same thing can be said for Caspar's kiss. All cultures, presumably, have kisses or something like kisses. But is that so certain? Eskimos are said to rub noses instead of kissing. A cursory search of Stephen Owen's twelve hundred page *An Anthology of Chinese Literature: Beginnings to 1911* has failed to turn up a single kiss, whereas, to stay with English literature as exemplary of the West, kisses are recounted in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, not to speak of most novels in English I can think of. There are lots of kisses in English literature; few or no kisses in classical Chinese literature! Even if kissing could be shown to be universal, the local protocols for evaluating kisses as proper or improper, as felicitous or infelicitous "sign-acts," for naming them or not naming them in literary works, are so particular, so bound up in a long cultural memory going back, in the West for example, to Judas's kiss of Jesus Christ, and so linked to particular historical moments in a given culture, that it is extremely difficult to explain to someone outside the culture just what is the nuance of meaning and effective power in a given kiss, for example Caspar's kiss of Isabel.

James's description of Caspar's kiss employs two catachreses, that is, figures brought in from realms that can be seen, known, and named to define something that has no proper name. These catachreses are the use of two images: that of the drowning person whose whole life passes before his eyes, and that of white lightning that spreads, and spreads again, and stays. Do non-Western cultures have a name or a concept that corresponds to our catachresis? Lu Ji's celebrated *Wen fu*, for example, has much to say about the difficulty of finding the right poetic words for things: "There are tens of thousands of different forms, / The things of the world have no single measure: / Jumbled and jostling, they go fleeting past, / And shapes they have that are hard to describe."³ In spite of this recognition of the difficulty in finding the right words for poetry, however, Lu Ji makes no appeal to the concept of metaphor, much less to catachresis, though both have been part of the Western tradition since Aristotle and before. Nevertheless Chinese poetry (at least in translations) makes extravagant use all the time of what we Westerners would call catachresis. It does so in the powerful juxtaposition of a subjective assertion and an objective description of something in nature. An example is this stanza from the *Classic of Poetry*, VI: "Peach tree soft and tender, / how your blossoms glow! / The bride is going to her home, / she well befits this house."⁴ Chinese poetry uses catachresis all the time but does not, apparently, have the name or the concept, though the word *bi* names a comparison and the word *xing* names a "stirring" or "affective image." Does that difference in terminology constitute a barrier between the two cultures that is only illicitly crossed by imposing the concepts of metaphor and catachresis on Chinese "literature"? Is "literature" even the right name for it, since Chinese has no word that corresponds very exactly to the English word "literature"? The word *wen*, I am told, has a quite different range of meanings.

My use of the concept of the secret, finally, as a distinctive feature of Western literature, though it can be referred to developments in Jacques Derrida's recent thought that are expressed in abstract conceptual terms, is so tied to particular Western religious and philosophical traditions, as is Western literature itself, as to be explained only

with difficulty to those outside one or another Western culture, just as a knowledge of Daoism is necessary to understand Chinese literature.

It is in encountering these difficulties, perhaps, that globalized literary study has most to learn from the care and fastidiousness of anthropology. A literary critic or theorist these days must think of himself or herself somewhat self-consciously as an anthropologist of his or her own culture's cultural productions, in this case literary works. I conclude that the transference of literary study to a global scale, though it is inevitable as a concomitant of economic and technological globalization, has, to put it mildly, its work cut out for it. Nevertheless, doing that work will be a major goal of literary study in the coming years.

NOTES

¹ See *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*, ed. and trans. Stephen Owen (New York: Norton, 1996), 443-28. "Autumn Stirrings" is perhaps the most famous group of poems in the Chinese language. The modern scholar Ye Jia-ying has put together a collection of the most famous pre-modern commentaries on these poems and has added her own interpretations. It makes a book of 449 pages.

² Henry James, *The Portrait of a Lady*, reprint of New York Edition (New Jersey: Augustus M. Kelley, 1976) 2: 436. *The Portrait of a Lady* makes up volumes 3 and 4 of the New York Edition. I have renumbered my references by calling them volumes 1 and 2 of *The Portrait of a Lady*.

³ Owen, op. cit., 336.

⁴ Owen, op. cit., 34.

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