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Fictions of the Global

RITA BARNARD

If global thinking is an extension of national thinking (and I'm not sure how big an "if" I want to make that), it seems fitting to start this provocation on familiar ground: with Benedict Anderson's meditations on the relationship between the novel and the nation. As every first-year graduate student knows, Anderson's *Imagined Communities* explores the role of vernacular languages and print culture in the development of a sense of emotional affinity between people who might never meet face to face. He emphasizes in particular the efficacy of the novel and also the newspaper (which he treats as an ephemeral bestseller) in this process. These forms establish, affirm, or express—it is not clear exactly what degree of agency Anderson intends—the necessary conditions for imagining the nation. Three features of the "traditional novel" in particular tend to link it to the nation, and I want to put them on the table in the briefest possible way before turning to more hypothetical reflections.

First is the novel's point of view. It may or may not be strictly omniscient, but it must transcend that of a single individual.

Second is the novel's representation of time and space. Anderson's theory of the novel does not require that the plot should describe the emergence of an imagined community in any overt way. At stake, rather, is a shared chronotope: a social space in which a certain temporality is taken for granted. The seemingly unimportant word *meanwhile* therefore becomes key; it indicates that even though certain characters may disappear from narrative focus for a while, the fates of all the novel's personages can be mapped out on a shared timeline and within a certain bounded space.

Third is the national novel's interpellation of a particular kind of reader: one who, while he or she may be hailed as friend or enemy, is capable of giving imaginative substance to that "meanwhile": one who may perform the necessary act of imaginative recognition through which the connections mentioned above come to seem meaningful.

This terse outline could obviously be refined and expanded considerably, as Jonathan Culler and others have done. But the question that engages me here is how the three aspects of the novel that stand out in Anderson's account would change if we were to imagine a novel not of the nation but of the world. The answer is not, I think, made any easier by our received notions of "postcolonial" and "world literature." Since there is no space here to fully explore this assertion, let me simply say that the forms most often hallowed by these notions, the novel of transnational migration (often laced with magical realist effects) and the colonial *bildungsroman* (often aimed at treating the metropolitan audience to a satisfying sense of identification with manageably different others), seem to have become rather stale

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today, as have the usual ways of accounting for them. I would therefore, as a kind of thought experiment, like to set these forms aside as I ask what the emergent fictions of the global might be. Let's forget about Rushdie, forget about Dangarembga, and certainly forget about Khaled Hosseini and ask ourselves where we might find a new kind of plot, with new coordinates of time and space, that may serve as a corollary to the brave neo world of millennial capitalism and perhaps even provide the conceptual preconditions for a cosmopolitan society.

Why not, for starters, turn to Latin America and what the Chilean novelist Alberto Fuguet back in 1996 dubbed the "McOndo generation," a group of younger writers and filmmakers who eschew the folkloric spaces of Gabriel García Márquez's remote and fabulous Macondo in favor of a contemporary Latin American reality that includes McDonalds, Mac computers, and condos? These emerging artists all express what Fuguet playfully terms a "new Free Trade Area of the Americas sensibility": "global, yet rooted" and very much "a work in progress" (68–69, 73). At stake in the work of novelists like Fuguet and Edmundo Paz Soldán and, say, the recent crop of Latin American film directors (Alejandro González Iñárritu, Guillermo Del Toro, Alfonso Cuarón, and Márquez's son, Roderigo García) is not a homogenizing Americanization, as the McOndo label might lead us to believe. It offers instead what Ulrich Beck describes as a simultaneous "cosmopolitanization from within" and localization from without (23, 25–26)—especially since all of these men live in and tell stories about the United States while retaining, as they insist, a third world sensibility (Fuguet 68, 73; Iñárritu, "Hollywood" 7).

Let us briefly consider the work of one of the most compelling filmmakers listed above. Alexandro Gonzáles Iñárritu's already classic films *Amores Perros* and *Babel* have been helpfully described under the rubric of "hyperlink cinema" (Ebert, "Think"; "Hyperlink Cinema"). These films are constructed from apparently unrelated stories and characters, which eventually reveal a hidden connection. Iñárritu's interest in this kind of plot arises, to judge from his interviews, from a sense that Hollywood's canned narrative forms have desensitized the filmgoing audience and made it impossible for people really to see the contemporary world ("Hollywood" 8). While he describes his films as experiments in breaking away from plot-driven cinema, we may view them not as attempts to abandon plot as such but as attempts to devise new and more cosmopolitan narrative forms: forms that might reshape our received notions of human interconnection, causality, temporality, social space, and so forth.

The film *Babel*, for example, is constructed of three intense little stories set in far-removed contexts: Morocco, the border of Southern California and Mexico, and Tokyo. For the sake of brevity, I will forgo any attempt at plot summary (which would be reductive anyway) and say only that the three narratives, which touch on such obviously global concerns as tourism, immigration, and terrorism (or putative terrorism), are linked by a single commodity. A gun, given by a wealthy Japanese business man to a Moroccan hunting guide, ends up being involved in the accidental shooting of an American tourist by a young Berber goatherder, an incident whose ramifications are felt in various ways in the film's various locations. While one might assume that the three stories are connected by their temporal simultaneity, the ending reveals (such is the film's equivalent to a plot twist) that this inter-

pretive assumption is false: a phone call from Morocco to San Diego, made at the beginning and replayed at the end of the film, lets us know that the Moroccan misadventure is already safely concluded before the Mexican misadventure begins. This twist seems to me extremely important: it retroactively disables or falsifies the “meanwhile” principle, which, in Anderson’s view, holds together the national novel and provides its readers with a shared sense of space and time. A sense of a vast and disjunct world is conveyed by the film’s very different mise-en-scènes, a difference underscored by the fact that three very different cinematic techniques are deployed (different lenses, different formats of film, etc). It is further emphasized by the problem of language announced in the title. The characters speak in six languages: English, Spanish, Japanese, Arabic, Berber, and sign language. Yet even though many commentaries on the film suggest that failed communication and misunderstanding provide the thematic glue that holds the three sections of the film together, I would suggest that the glue, if you will, is ultimately formal rather than thematic. *Babel*, it seems to me, is a celebration of cinematic form itself, of what Iñárritu thinks of as the “Esperanto” of film (Hollywood Reporter 1): the language of image, music, human bodies, human voices, and, of course, subtitles.

The film is also a deliberate attempt to hail a cosmopolitan audience. *Babel* never allows us to imagine that it is a simple matter to replace the homogeneous space, time, and language of the nation with something new: we are never allowed to forget the sheer cinematic tour de force that went into producing this fractured but hyperlinked text. What enables us to connect the three stories and three social locales is ultimately an intense, overarching affect: a kind of globalization of compassion that arises from a profound sense of human isolation and physical vulnerability. Readers may recall here the final image of the film: a naked girl being comforted by her father as the camera tracks back to reveal more and more of Tokyo’s immense and cold nightscape.

Now to the novel—the focus, after all, of our collective enterprise in this journal. Let me note first of all that the era of the personal computer and the Internet gave rise to a number of actual hyperlink novels. One of the more successful examples is Geoff Ryman’s *253*, constituted of 253 disconnected yet connected vignettes of 253 words about 253 people in an underground train on London’s Bakerloo line. Though eventually published in book form (and thereby inevitably gaining a greater sense of temporal sequence and dynamism), the novel originally appeared on the Internet, where readers could click on the names of characters, read the stories in any order, or skip to the climax at will. For the purposes of this essay, however, I would prefer—like Roger Ebert—to deploy the notion of the hyperlink more metaphorically and to turn my attention to an interesting work of fiction published in 1999: the young British writer David Mitchell’s *Ghostwritten*.

An experimental first book of considerable audacity and flair, *Ghostwritten* is made up of nine first-person narratives, whose titles derive from the places in which each respective story is set: Okinawa, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Holy Mountain (possibly the Thousand Buddha Mountain in Shandong Province), Mongolia, St. Petersburg, London, and Clear Island, an idyllic Gaelic-speaking community. The range of characters includes a member of the Aum Shin Rikio cult who is responsible for the sarin gas attack on the Tokyo subway, a young Japanese record store

clerk and saxophonist, a crooked British financial lawyer (clearly based on Nick Leeson, the infamous Hong Kong stockbroker), a Chinese tea shack owner, a migratory spirit or noncorpum that originates in the body of a young Mongolian monk, a shady sextop curator at the Hermitage museum, a dissolute British rock musician and ghostwriter, and an Irish nuclear physicist. The somewhat anomalous penultimate section narrates the broadcasts of a call-in radio show called “Night Train”; it introduces the Howard Stern-like DJ called Bat Segundo, along with yet another noncorpum: a digital entity called Zookeeper that is programmed, along with other conflicting purposes, to protect human life. A synoptic coda titled “Underground” finally returns us to the Aum Shin Rikio killer, Quasar, and his anxious observations as he struggles to escape from the fatal subway car; observations (like saxophone music from a Walkman, a booklet about St. Petersburg, the image of the London Underground on a vinyl bag) that serve as a compressed index of the novel’s various locations, in the exact east to west order I have just described. The coda offers, in other words, a synoptic montage—proleptic or retrospective (depending on whether one privileges the time of narration or the time of reading)—of the novel’s broad geographic trajectory.

It is not exactly right to say that *Ghostwritten*’s constitutive narratives are interwoven. The connections are often on the order of small incidents or details: the idea of a highlighted hyperlink, in fact, works very well as an analogy. The most striking example of these is the first one, where the device is still a surprise: the Aum Shin Rikio cultist, short of cash in his Okinawa hideout, calls a number in Tokyo and appeals for help in code: “The dog needs to be fed” (26). In the second story, Saturo, the record store clerk, receives a misdirected phone call from some strange person saying “The dog needs to be fed” (53)—a mystifying but unimportant moment in a life focused on his own very different concerns. While these links might seem gimmicky at first (I note that a *Wikipedia* expert has diligently listed all of these minute connections), the novel is in fact crisscrossed with many other interlinking details for the keen reader to discover: recurrent minor characters, objects, stories, poems, songs, and themes (causality, chance, ghosts, and so forth). As Miriam Estin has noted, *Ghostwritten* even repeats certain lines and phrases; it quotes from itself, as it were, to create a further layer of seeming random connections between the constituent narratives (10–11). In the Petersburg section, for example, the narrator, Margarita Lutansky, notices the new shops popping up along the Nevsky Prospect and comments: “Benetton, the Haagen-Dazs Shop, Nike, Burger King, a shop that sells nothing but camera film and key rings, another that sells Swatches and Rolexes. High Streets are becoming the same all over the world, I suppose” (211). Lutansky’s complaints echo almost verbatim the jeremiad of Quasar in Naha, Okinawa: “The same shops as anywhere else . . . Burger King, Benetton, Nike. . . High streets are becoming the same all over the world, I suppose” (11). At moments like these (or when the financial lawyer, Hong Kong mud on his ankles, is nevertheless outfitted with “shoes from Pennsylvania, a silk tie made in Milan, and a briefcase full of Japanese and American gadgetry” [82]), *Ghostwritten* thematizes what Ulrich Beck has called “banal everyday globalization” (28)—the counterpart to the “banal nationalism” of, say, the soccer fan. But every section of the novel also draws attention to more fundamental features

of globalization such as international finance, worldwide crime syndicates, labor migration, tourism, and terrorism. In so doing, *Ghostwritten* seems to suggest that its characters—whether fixed in a particular locality (like the tea shack lady) or hypermobile (like the backpackers and the nuclear physicist)—operate within a linked set of emerging global conditions.

However, because the traditional novel's relation with the nation was, in Anderson's argument, formal rather than thematic (the plot need not recount the emergence of the nation), it seems appropriate to attend more closely to what seems to be Mitchell's deliberate effort to imagine some sort of global narrative form. His experiments, I readily concede, might be somewhat callow, conducted in a spirit of reckless bravado, but it is nevertheless worth considering them in relation to three aspects of the national novel I briefly outlined at the beginning of this essay.

Let me turn first to the matter of the chronotope. Even from my brief initial description, it is easy to see that *Ghostwritten's* terrain far exceeds that of the nation (despite the fact that each narrative is set in a discrete locality and that national stereotypes and national histories—Chinese history in the case of Holy Mountain—remain part of the textual fabric). The “meanwhile” effect consequently gives way to a kind of randomly overlapping succession. One cannot even be sure that all sections share what Anderson calls “homogenous empty time.” Some of the constituent stories (like the Tokyo and Petersburg sections) have fairly straightforward and sequential narrative lines, while others deal in complex flashbacks or even (in the case of “Night Train”) flash-forwards. The “Hong Kong” novella, for example, is a time-obsessed stream of consciousness narrative, confined (like the Quentin section of *The Sound and the Fury*) to the day before the narrator's death. “Holy Mountain,” by contrast, encompasses the entire twentieth century while yet retaining something of the recurrent temporality of the folkloric (or perhaps of Brecht's satirical sagas of disastrous recurrence). The science fiction-like “Night Train” section, in yet another contrast, is set in the future, its incidents leapfrogging across a ten-year period of ever intensifying international crises. In its crazy complexity, *Ghostwritten* seems designed to capture the geographies and temporalities of globalization—not exactly that of the famous “time-space compression” but certainly that of a very extensive, uneven, and precarious modernity. Whether this effort is entirely successful is open to debate, but it is at least interesting to see that Mitchell does not simply widen the geographical scope of his novel; he recognizes (rather like Iñárritu, who chooses to use different camera lenses with different depths of field in each of his locales) that the experimentation must be pushed further if the work is to be properly global. Indeed, the vast spatial extension seems to elicit such a range of different—and differently paced—plots and characters that *Ghostwritten* (as well as Mitchell's second novel, *Cloud Atlas*) could possibly be faulted for seeming like a set of virtuosic writer's exercises in multiple genres.

Second, if the novel of the nation requires a capacious and overarching point of view, a global novel would arguably need to establish an even more formidably encompassing narrative vantage. This idea is most obviously experimented with in the “Night Train” section, where, as I noted earlier, a noncorpum calling itself the Zookeeper occasionally holds forth on a New York City radio show. I pro-

vide a sampling of its perspective (the Zookeeper's gender, like that of god, seems contested):

Bacillus anthracis has mutated to strain L. Nineteen civil wars are claiming more than five hundred lives a day. A fission reactor meltdown in North Korea has contaminated 3,000 square kilometers. East Timor has been firebombed by Indonesia. Famine is claiming 1,400 lives daily in Bangladesh. A virulent outbreak of a synthetic bubonic plague—the red plague—is endemic in Eastern Australia. . . . Cholera is creeping up the Central American isthmus. (416)

Or for a different flavor:

[T]here is a village in an Eritrean mountain pass. A dusty track winds up an escarpment into the village square, and leaves for the plateau beyond. It could be one of ten thousand villages in Eastern Africa. Whitewashed walls and roofs of corrugated tin or straw thatch ward off the sun. There's one well for water and a barn to store grain. Livestock and chickens wander around the village. A school, a meager clinic, a cemetery. A gardenia bush covered with butterflies. The butterflies have snake-eyes on their wings to scare away predators. Vultures are already picking at the corpses around the mosque. The ground is smoky with flies. (417)

This godlike, or rather surveillance satellite-like, point of view is hard to take entirely seriously. Unlike the conventional omniscient narrative, it remains marked as experiment: partly parodic and partly utopian because the Zookeeper does seem programmed to care (up to a point) about its charges.

The more predominant point of view in the novel, however, is that of a shifting first-person narrator: precisely the kind of experientially limited point of view that the national novel à la Anderson would exclude. Yet the cumulative effect, especially as a result of the hyperlinking techniques, is of a kind of synthetic or sutured omniscience that transcends any single individual's experience and spans *Ghostwritten's* disjunct mise-en-scènes. As one moves from one section to the next, it becomes possible to see a character first from the inside and then from the outside. The point is readily illustrated in relation to the terrorist, Quasar. In the Okinawa section the reader is privy to his language, observations, and worldview, in terms of which postwar Japan is but a "market for Disney and McDonald's," an "unsinkable aircraft carrier for the United States" (8), Aum Shin Rikio is a pure "nation without borders" (9), and the sarin attack is a necessary purgation of the "unclean." When Quasar, some four hundred pages later, calls in to the "Night Train" show in a desperate attempt to communicate with his cult leader, we immediately recognize his mode of expression (we have, after all, previously inhabited his mind), but we are suddenly and sharply reminded that the language in which he expresses himself has "actually" been Japanese all along: the DJ threatens to cut the caller off unless he speaks English (406), and the all-knowing Zookeeper identifies him as "a severe delusional, wanted by the police" (411). Through shifts like these (and there are countless other examples), *Ghostwritten* deploys not a stable omniscient point of view (that of a wide-angle track shot, say) but a kind of multiple, mobile

optic, both internal and external to its successive narrators. This vantage is aptly metaphorized by the noncorpum that narrates the Mongolia section: a simultaneously familiar and alien entity that moves in and out of various bodies, minds, and locations, traverses the world, and eventually develops an encompassing ethical vision. While the noncorpum explicitly articulates its connection to such intimate strangers as the backpacker and the parasite, it is also analogous to the reader, who must also, in the course of perusing this novel, become a mobile, linguistically and culturally flexible insider/outsider.

The discussion of point of view thus inevitably slides into the third issue that concerns me: the novel's address to its readers as members of a potential imagined community. The national novel, for Anderson, has a quasi-pedagogical or performative function: it creates an affective fraternity, a "community of those who pick up the book and accept the readerly role that it offers" (Culler 29). It is in this respect that the possibility of a global novel is of course most strenuously tested. One can see how a novel in a national language might create the conceptual preconditions for imagining nationhood, but can this process ever be projected globally? *Ghostwritten*, after all, is written in English: the "Esperanto" of cinema is sadly not available to the novelist. Whereas a director like Iñárritu is able to rely on the *simultaneous translation* of subtitles (not to mention the transnational languages of music and image), Mitchell must resort to the more problematic practice of *transfer* (Coetzee 143): the convention by which readers are asked to imagine that a given character is speaking or thinking in a different language from that of the novel itself. The dialogue or thoughts of the "foreign" character are, as it were, silently translated into the language of the text as a whole. The problems inherent in such linguistic transfer become evident, in the case of *Ghostwritten*, in those instances in which the English is marked in various ways to provide some sort of flavor of the putative original: e.g., when Mitchell punctuates a Chinese peasant's thought with numerous references to chicken shit (or "camelshit," in the case of a Mongolian one [159]) or has his Irish characters say things like "Holy Dooley" and "Morning to the pair o'ye!" (234, 348). It is at such moments, when we seem to fall back on national stereotype, that the novel's claims to a global or cosmopolitan sensibility seem to be at their weakest. This said, *Ghostwritten's* foregrounding of the problem of language—its constant cues that we are, however temporarily and artificially inhabiting a Japanese, or Mongolian, or Russian linguistic world—does work to challenge the normativity of English (perhaps most notably so when the Chinese tea shack lady describes the Westerners' speech as sounding like "farting pigs" [129]). Such a challenge is, of course, a paradoxical enterprise to undertake in an English novel. Yet *Ghostwritten* forcefully reminds its readers that the world is a multilingual place; it invites them, through the overarching metaphor of ghostwriting, to adopt a kind of drifting or spectral relation to language, a relation that estranges English while reducing the alienness of other tongues.

I would like to conclude, however, with a different, if similarly vulnerable, speculation about the text's potential hailing of a cosmopolitan audience. Several reviewers of *Ghostwritten* have decried the science fiction-like turn at the end of the book as strained and excessive, and I confess that at first reading I shared this view. But this futuristic, even apocalyptic turn becomes deeply interesting if we view it,

as Estin proposes, in light of Beck's distinction between national and global or cosmopolitan sensibilities—especially since his thinking is here so clearly shaped by Anderson (Estin 13; Beck 27). Nations, Beck argues, are united by a collective past. In cosmopolitan societies, by contrast, the definition and construction of collectivity are based on a shared sense of collective crisis. "It is the future, not the past," he declares, that "'integrates' the cosmopolitan age" (27). Reading *Ghostwritten* in the post-9/11 world, one often feels that the novel is prescient in its representation of political conflagrations, acts of terrorism, and threats of environmental cataclysm. While its playful hyperlinking often gives the impression that the operative principle of global interconnection is random (Paul Auster's *The Music of Chance*, after all, is one of the novel's proliferating intertexts), its engagement with the potential of global catastrophe may ultimately have a different effect. It permits us to entertain the idea that *Ghostwritten's* constituent narratives evoke—through negation—a desire for agency and global responsibility. It is such a desire that, in Beck's view, may begin to call into being a utopian cosmopolitan society: a society whose time and space, as I have suggested here, are beginning to find narrative expression.

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