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Parochialism from below: on World Literature's other other

Today's "cosmopolitanism" is a moving target – in more ways than one. Rather than focus on the more pressing question insinuated by this opening salvo, that is, on the real dangers that threaten this ideal in the current political climate, I will examine the narrower and not entirely unconnected question of its elusive quality. I shall not seek to provide a new "final" definition of a term that already has a long history, competing genealogies and interpretations, both in connection to the revived notion of World Literature and otherwise.[1] In this short essay – and I stress the word "essay", as opposed to scholarly article – I will attempt to somewhat shift the terms of the debate on cosmopolitanism by bolstering what I regard as its under-examined Other, namely: parochialism. As we shall see, parochialism is more complex than meets the eye. My goal is not to defend the local: this has already been done. Nor the national: ditto, with fences and drones. Rather, it is the system of oppositions that I modestly seek to bring into question. (Derrida does something similar on a grand scale, with the problem of right of asylum in mind, rather than literary historiography). The approach I will attempt to outline may or may not assuage credible concerns that, as Omid Azadibougar and Esmaeil Haddadian-Moghaddam put it, World Literature could very well be a "dead-end concept" (Azadibougar/Moghaddam 2016: 8), but it will reveal an overlooked aspect in the ongoing conversation about cosmopolitanism.

It's worth remembering the role that modern linguistics grants to opposition in signification. To produce meaning, a signifier must distinguish. I cite an explanation from the English translation of Saussure's 1916 *Cours de linguistique générale* apropos words borrowed from a different language: "a loan-word no longer counts as such whenever it is studied within a system; it exists only through its relation with, and opposition to, words associated with it, just like any other genuine sign" (Saussure 1966: 22). (One such words is, felicitously, "apropos", above). The defining opposite of cosmopolitanism is, most commonly, nationalism. I find this problematic – a false dilemma leading to false

1 For a state-of-the-discipline collection of critical-theory inspired essays, look no further than Robbins/Horta (2017). For a bold attempt to reconcile the alternative new materialist (Stengers, Latour) and deconstructive (Derrida) veins of the cosmopolitanism debate, see Watson (2014).

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compromise. So has César Domínguez, as early as 2011. He summarizes a lengthier argument, rich in source review: "Losing/gaining in translation and 'authentic expression'/ventriloquism should not be considered as direct counterparts of nationalism/cosmopolitanism" (Domínguez 2011: 251). "Gaining in translation" alludes to David Damrosch's much-discussed 2003 definition of World Literature – which, let me note in passing, elides the question of *differential* gain (Damrosch 2003: 289). The remaining poles all map onto the original dichotomy. So much for aligning World Literature with cosmopolitanism, then, as if it were its natural ethical correlate. And yet the view is shared by Aníbal González's "Más allá de la nación" guest-edited number of *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, published a year after Domínguez's essay in 2012. Regardless, taking the latter's conclusions further, it's not a matter of a term being an asymmetrical opposite to its Other – cosmopolitanism doesn't (yet) have a corresponding polity, the way nationalism does –, the task that interests me is that of questioning the opposition itself.

Something analogous could be said about the pair "local" and "global", which lead to the compromising neologism "glocal", the theme of several studies, notably Jesús Montoya and Ángel Esteban's eponymous collection, *Entre lo local y lo global*, from 2008. My own *Beyond Bolaño: The Global Latin American Novel* from 2015 builds on this opposition as well, along with that of Latin Americanism/World Literature, favoring productive contradiction over compromise. For its part, Mariano Siskind's *Cosmopolitan Desires* (2014) opposes cosmopolitanism to lack: to become a citizen-of-the-world (*kosmopolitês*) is an unattainable object of desire that, in turn, fuels the drive towards global modernity. "World Literature" itself is a loan-word in Latin Americanism. When it does enter into that conversation, it swiftly generates a system of oppositions that, whether it interrogates the poles or not, pre-supposes them. World Literature is progressive and Latin Americanism regressive, or vice versa; Ángel Rama suddenly finds himself sitting across the table from Goethe; one camp gets accused of cultural imperialism, the other of nativism, and so on. The specter of cosmopolitanism haunts these discussions. From a slur waged against *déracinés* to a globally-aspired condition, wherever cosmopolitanism (and its cognate, World Literature) go, they reconfigure signification by entering into field-defining oppositions.

Here is where parochialism comes into the picture. In common usage, the term is, at best, synonymous with small-mindedness and quaintness; at worst, with conservatism and outright exclusion, even xenophobia. The assumption is that villages can never be the site of revolutions or miscegenation. This might perhaps be the case for some idealized European small cities, though it certainly is not true for, say, Cuzco. (It's also debatable of many *actual* European locales).

Still, parochialism, with its etymological ties to the base structures of the Catholic church, is object of casual derision. However, geographers and social scientists do not necessarily concur. This I find particularly relevant for literary studies, given that so much of our critical vocabulary – case in point, "globalization" – originates in those disciplines, yet has become numbingly naturalized and ingrained into our own. For one, John Tomaney, who teaches Urban and Regional Planning at University College London, remarks that "cosmopolitanism is a kind of provincialism (. . .) it doubts the social and artistic value of the parish" (Tomaney 2013: 659). This thoughtful dialectical inversion draws on the work of Patrick Kavanagh, the Irish poet and novelist, for whom parochialism and provincialism are in fact opposites. The provincial aspires validation from the metropolis; the parishioner, so to speak, is self-assured in the local scene.

Let me illustrate this by turning to León de Greiff, the great Colombian poet (1895–1976). Born in Medellín of more-or-less direct German and Swedish descent, de Greiff is known for the erudition and musicality of his work. His alter egos ("Leo le Gris", "Gaspar de la Nuit", etc.) place him in the company of the Portuguese Fernando Pessoa (1888–1935), his senior by less than a decade. His deliberately archaic lexicon and overall formal complexity make him, at times, illegible – reminiscent of better-known avant-garde contemporaries, the Peruvian César Vallejo (1892–1938) or the Chilean Vicente Huidobro (1893–1948). (De Greiff outlived them all, and carried on cultivating and contorting the Spanish language well beyond the prime of experimentalism). The Colombian produced a rich and vast oeuvre; he enjoys cult following to this day in a country known to fill stadiums for multilingual poetry recitals ("Festival Internacional"). His work continues to have a significant "social function" by any standard: university auditoriums and public libraries bear his name ("La Ladera"). Moreover, his poetry has been translated to multiple languages – in small print-run, mostly boutique editions, but still (*Antología multilingüe*). In sum, León de Greiff could very well be the poster child of those left behind by the historiographical grand narrative of modernism.

Before the critical wheels start turning in an attempt to reconcile the anomaly with current consensus – is he another "master in the periphery of capitalism", to borrow Schwarz's framing of Machado, or rather a case-study for Casanovan diffusionism or heterochronic global modernism? – it's best to consider how his verses reflect on their own positionality.[2] Take one of his early poems, "Villa de la Candelaria", dated 1914:

2 For alternative takes on the expanded canon and critical apparatus of global modernism, see Hayot and Walkowitz's edited collection (2016).

Vano el motivo
desta prosa:
nada..
Cosas de todo día.
Sucesos
banales.
Gente necia,
local y chata y roma.
Gran tráfico
en el marco de la plaza.
Chismes.
Catolicismo.
Y una total inopia en los cerebros..
Cual
si todo
se fincara en la riqueza,
en menjurjes bursátiles
y en un mayor volumen de la panza.[3] (1925: 28)

D'après Damrosch, De Greiff's poetry might not count as World Literature, for it certainly loses in translation. From the original, I tried to convey the odd syntax and slowly punctuated ennui, not without compromise. To a Spanish native, "inopia" sounds more archaic than "indigence" to an English native. De Greiff's word choice mirrors the poetic subject's benign mockery of his contemporaries, most of whom would have had to pull out a dictionary to understand a deceivingly vernacular ("prosaic") poem. "Inopia" is still occasionally used in cultivated Bogotá Spanish — "me dejaron en la inopia" ('they wiped me out [of money]') —, and presumably more so in the 1910s. Alternatively, "impecuniousness" could convey the pomp, if only it didn't ruin the rhythm. And then I did not want to overstate the haughtiness, for it's all rather sweet: a parodically condescending homage to the village at the heart of the city. La Candelaria is today's historical, colonial, downtown neighborhood. It was a bigger portion of Bogotá back then. Here it's a synecdoche for the entire city, even for the nation, as well as a metonym for a state of mind both industrious and quaint – modernity at a standstill. This contradiction is best captured in the couplet "menjurjes bursátiles". Note the spelling, a Colombian variation of the standard "menjunje" (Diccionario RAE). The allitera-

3 My own working translation: "Vane the reason/for this prose:/no thing. . .//happenstance.//Events//banal.//Dumb folk//local and flat and blunt.//Major traffic//surrounding the square./Gossip./Catholicism./And complete indigence in the brains. . ./As if/everything/hinged upon wealth,/stock-market brews/and a greater volume of the paunch".

tion that follows hinges upon the extra "r" (menju**r**jes bu**r**sátiles), wrapping the whole affair in a guttural, swallowing sound. Bellies are growing and minds are none the wiser.

Or are they? After all, De Greiff is crafting a sophisticated artifact from all this inanity. With some displacement, I translated the polysyndeton "local y chata y roma" as "local and flat and blunt" because "blunt", like "chata", can be both a personal attribute and the description of an instrument. The verse breaks down into the absurd. As readers encounter the phrase "local y chata ['short']", they picture the poetic voice as a tall (European?) man literally looking down on his countrymen; when they come across the additional "roma", which is how one would describe a knife that has no edge, they chuckle. For elucidation, what would the opposite of the original phrase be? "Universal and tall and edgy"? The racialized undertones play out in different ways, however, for "chata" is a term of endearment in Bogotá (similar to "shorty"); "chata and roma" can also be attributes of a small nose (adding to the absurd); and "roma" is but a capitalized letter away from "Rome", the center of the (Catholic) world. The poet's mockery is self-directed, because he is one with the folk; the poem a prankster's testament. All this goes to showing how "Villa de la Candelaria" renders parochialism in all its richness and complexity.

In simple terms, Tomaney characterizes parochialism as caring for one's parish. This includes passers-by and more or less settled foreigners – there is nothing "blood and soil" about it. Neither is it about navel-gazing and glorified local color, for "places are characterized by disputes which act as a simulacrum of larger conflict [. . .] emplacement is the basis for engagement with the world" (Tomaney 2013: 668). Reading the likes of León de Greiff as World Literature brings these points home, no pun intended. The emplaced, dull disputes in the poem above echo major debates about the ownership and telos of modernity. They are not, however, *peripheral* to them, and neither are they belated – by whose standard? The system of oppositions surrounding cosmopolitanism changes when it's defining Other, instead of nationalism, regionalism, or provincialism, is a self-centered, caring ethos. The parish, thus understood, only partially overlaps with something as ethnic as the nation, as geographic as the region, or as small-minded as the province. It is neither circumscribed by ethnicity nor oblivious to it; parochialism acknowledges the power of place without being exhausted by it. More importantly, although opposed to cosmopolitanism – which forcibly happens at a bigger scale – parochialism is not inimical to cosmopoiltanism: the good parishioner, so to speak, can also be a cosmopolitan.

Again, one may look at De Greiff for illustration. By his seventh book of poetry – "mamotreto" in his parlance – a full-fledged *neo-culteranista* poet has

emerged.[4] In "Relato de los oficios y mesteres de Beremundo", a long poem dated 1955, the Colombian Góngora features the heteronym – itself a homophony for 'seeing the world', *ver el mundo* – recount his life of travel, reading, drinking, writing, and loving. Less adventurous, literal-minded Jaime Tello translates the title as "Narration of the Jobs and Trades of Beremundo" (De Greiff 1995: 437). "Ballad of the Trades and Crafts of Worldogle", might be going too far, but "ballad" touches upon the medieval poetry and musicality implicit in "mester", while "Worldogle" conveys the amorous staring-at-the-world of the wondering, bard-like hero. Regardless, let me rely on Tello, as his 1995 version is the most recent of only two English translations available in print. (Moreover, what is lost in translation is of interest here). De Greiff is thoroughly cosmopolitan *and* parochial. Unfortunately, the translation makes him provincial. Consider the following stanza, from about a fifth of the way down in this 25-page enumeration of a poem:

> Viajé con Julio Verne y Odiseo, Magallanes y Pigafetta,
> Salgari, Leo e lbn-Batuta,
> con Melville y Stevenson, Fernando González y Conrad
> y Sir John de Mandeville y Marco Polo,
> y sólo, sin de Maistre, alredor de mi biblioteca, de mi
> oploteca, mi mecanoteca y mi pinacoteca.
> Viajé también en torno de mí mismo: asno a la vez que
> noria.[5] (De Greiff 1995: 402)

Where did the bewildering, musical "tecas" go? Tello's two museums and one painting collection are clearly poor choices, at least as far as rhythm and rhyme are concerned. The translator favors meaning, despite an ars poetica, later in the poem, where Beremundo claims to have returned to Semantics "a la diabla, en broma:/semanto-semasiólogo tarambana pillín piruetante" (De Greiff 1995: 406). I read this as an indication that sound *is* meaning; Tello translates it "as a joke, in disorder:/semanto-semasiologist crackpot little rascal pirouette" (De Greiff 1995: 444). More importantly, these choices reveal the overall rationale

4 The indispensable glossary to navigate the dense sea of De Greiff's references is Macías Zuluaga and Velásquez Velásquez (2007). For a heuristic, critical exercise in drowning in that sea, see Mazzoldi (2013). Hjalmar De Greiff, the poet's son, sets the record straight regarding idyosincrasies, lacunae, and variant versions of the poems in De Greiff (2004).

5 "I traveled with Jules Verne and Odysseus, Magellan and/ Pigafetta, Salgari, Leo and Ibn-Batuta,/with Melville and Stevenson, Fernando Gonzalez and/Conrad and Sir John Mandeville and Marco Polo,/and alone, without De Maistre, around my library, my/arms museum, my toy museum and my paintings/collection./I also traveled about myself: donkey and noria at the same/time" (De Greiff 1995: 440).

that drives his translation. Tello takes De Greiff more seriously than the poet takes himself, and in so doing, turns the parochial, emplaced citizen of the world into a lacking, aspiring cosmopolitan. De Maistre doubles as reference to Xavier de Maistre, the 18th century digressive, Sterne-like novelist, and as wordplay: the self-taught De Greiff, in a sense, had "no master". In his library, per his more or less explicit avowal, he went around in circles like an ass. As if this were all too unseemly, Tello over-explains and levels idiosyncrasies. Extrapolating: his awareness of presenting a semi-peripheral author to the potentially canonizing readership of the English language plays out several of the complexes of World Literature.

For one, there is the issue of how to deal with (literary) inequality: the insurmountable fact that some parishes matter more than others. One can ignore this or try to redress the situation – a lot goes into the "how". Tello is a symptom of the prevailing trend, which is that of catering to the center. (Full disclosure: the present essay could be accused of doing the same, but that is only part of its dialectic). The periphery has to do the explanation; the center just has to be. For instance, the worldly reader is expected to appreciate the cemetery of Père Lachaise, in Paris: to always already recognize its cultural heft. That is not the case with, say, the monument to Benkos Biojó on the main square of San Basilio de Palenque, despite its world historical significance. Beremundo's travels through places and books are cognizant of this, make light of it, and demand more of cosmopolitanism. Tellingly, one of the trades of Beremundo has been teaching "these little summer courses on comparative Berber literatures" (De Greiff 1995: 443, translation modified). We also read, in a notoriously hilarious passage:

> –y [platiqué con] el Manco y Sancho y Don Quijote–
> y trafiqué en "ultramarinos": ¡qué calamares –en su tinta–!,
> ¡qué Anisados de Guarne!, ¡qué Rones de Jamaica!, ¡qué
> Vodkas de Kazán!, ¡qué Tequilas de México!,
> ¡qué Néctares de Heliconia! ¡Morcillas de Itagüí!
> ¡Torreznos de Envigado! ¡Chorizos de los Balkanes!
> ¡Qué butifarras cataláunicas![6] (De Greiff 1995: 404)

De Greiff collapses highbrow and lowbrow, plausible and implausible. Cervantes is a character among his own characters, themselves not far from the

6 "– [I did have chats] with Cervantes, Sancho and Don Quixote –/and trafficked with groceries: what squids – in their ink –!,/what Anisettes from Guarne! what Jamaican Rums! What/ Vodkas of Kazan! what Mexican Tequilas!/what Nectars from Heliconia! Blood Sausages from/ Itagüi! Fried Bacon from Envigado!/Sausages from the Balkans!/Catalan Sausages!".

colonial goods (not "groceries") that Beremundo smuggles. It would be a different world where someone dealt in that precise constellation of liqueurs and delicacies – a world as unlikely as the existence of a centuries-old interlocutor of the "manco" who had also met the filaments of his imagination. Tequilas from Mexico (or Jalisco, rather) are known the world over, as arguably Vodkas from Kazan are, but you truly have to be an *antioqueño*, or otherwise well-traveled in Colombia, to have had the anisettes, blood sausages, and fried bacon listed.[7] "Nectars from Heliconia", for all its classic overtones, alludes to shots of *aguardiente* taken at a town named after a bright red flower from the region. (Not to the flower itself, lest Beremundo be something of a frantic bee). But why stop there? Balkan and *cataláunica* – an archaism for Catalonian – sausages bring the passage to its unlikely crisis. In a comic register, the takeaway is twofold: parochialism and cosmopolitanism co-exist; parish differentials are negotiated over time, at least in part, through wit.

Tomaney notes that "parochialism is not an end state but one of becoming; we are always becoming native" (Tomaney 2013: 668). In De Greiff, decisively, becoming native is a two-way street. Colombian readers see the world through his eyes; *ultramarino* readers, urgent new translations permitting, get to dwell in his unique highland parish. This is an asymmetrical exchange, to be sure. Moreover, the asymmetry is an essential part of the poetry. Parochialism eschews questions of simultaneity or centrality – the prevailing elucidating metaphors of the cosmopolitanism debate. Instead, it favors values such as specificity and internal consistency. It teaches how to care for communities beyond those of primary belonging, including one where De Greiff, to borrow Borges's phrase, is met with "anticipated fervor and mysterious loyalty" (Borges 1975: 617). Repairing the inequities of World Literature and adopting a truly cosmopolitan axiology require deeper engagement with the literary events of others. De Greiff's euphoric word play is at a disadvantage, for his parishioners have yet to find ways of conveying its singularity. Rather than try to render legible an indigenous writer, the task is to indigenize the world. As Beremundo might put it, untranslatably:

> –trueque y trastrueque– del cuyo mío y de entrambos. . .
> ¿Trabalenguas? ¿Enigma?
> –¡No que nó!: paradigma del mutuo entregarse, del en
> mutuo donarse. . .
> ¡metafísica física! (De Greiff 1995: 421)

7 At the time of De Greiff's writing, tequila was not yet a globalized spirit. See Williams (2015).

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