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book review

The Global Imagination

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David Palumbo-Liu

The Deliverance of Others: Reading Literature in a Global Age

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David Palumbo-Liu, a professor of comparative literature at Stanford hitherto best known for his work on the Asian/American cultural diaspora, has produced a fine new book that seeks to uphold the value of reading literary texts in what he calls ‘a global age’. His argument is that literary aesthetics ‘help us meditate on the ways we are connected to, and act in relation to, others’, (x) and from this perspective literature for Palumbo-Liu could be said to fulfil a moral function no less than it did, half a century ago, for Lionel Trilling in *The Liberal Imagination* (1950). Whereas for Trilling the special qualities of literature involved its capacity to open the eyes of readers to qualities of ambiguity, flexibility and open-mindedness, for Palumbo-Liu the value of engaging with literature in our global moment lies in the way it radically enlarges our circle of sympathy, thereby elucidating ‘the goal of a more democratic,

just, and equal modality of interdependence'. (vii) For Palumbo-Liu, one key aspect of globalisation is the way it makes 'points of contact and contagion with otherness ... far more numerous', (3) and in this sense his argument is predicated upon the notion of an extension of sympathy across a global circumference. Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) is cited as an important point of reference in Palumbo-Liu's work and, like Smith, he is interested in how various forms of social interaction and exchange create bonds of commensurability across national boundaries.

The author describes this self-deprecatingly as a 'short book, meant to be almost a kind of primer', (xii) but it includes chapters focused around astute readings of texts produced by J.M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Kazuo Ishiguro and the Japanese author Ruth Ozeki. In the case of Ozeki these bonds of commensurability clearly emerge out of an institutional framework, since in his acknowledgments Palumbo-Liu notes how Ozeki 'was kind enough not only to share her films and fiction with me, but also, over the course of a term here at Stanford, to discuss at length ... her creative process'. (xiii) In the body of the work, Palumbo-Liu comments with the assurance of a skilled literary critic on ways Coetzee dismantles the structure of the traditional realist novel to expose his narratives to the radical otherness of the non-human as well as the otherness of race, and in this chapter he takes issue pointedly with the work of Martha Nussbaum, whose injunctions to empathise with 'the lives of others' are, as he says, driven by examples 'exclusively drawn from realist literature'. (28) In his discussion of Gordimer, Palumbo-Liu comments on ways in which the South African activist novelist strove to keep alive certain modes of knowing others by extending the idea of a 'house' beyond its immediate family circle to embrace wider national and global communities, while in his treatment of Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* he analyses ways in which advances in medical technology have created alternative kinds of human identity and community, one framed by what he calls 'operationalisation' in its various guises. In a fascinating excursus during this chapter, Palumbo-Liu reads Ishiguro's novel alongside Jean-Luc Nancy's essay *L'intrus*, where the French philosopher contemplates the extent to which his heart transplant, the substitution of another's organ for his own, served to recalibrate his own sense of personal being and self-understanding. Finally, in relation to Ozeki's narratives—both her novel *My Year of*

Meats and the film she produced with Marina Zurkow, *Body of Correspondence*—Palumbo-Liu considers how the opening up of virtual media ‘that interface with our lives and bodies nearly continually’ (151) has created the prospect of a ‘poetics of trans-Pacific solidarity’ (132), where ‘oceanic feeling’ (137) forms ‘the wellspring of global affect’. (139)

All this is expertly done, and the range of material covered—from cloning to Facebook, from mass media to close textual reading—is highly impressive. But one of the potential drawbacks to this book’s overall argument, to my mind, is its overt indebtedness to older models of literary sympathy and what it calls ‘liberal sentiment’. (121) Although Palumbo-Liu wisely distances himself from Nussbaum’s more stentorian forms of moral appropriation, there are, in truth, fairly obvious continuities between Trilling’s notion of the liberal imagination and Palumbo-Liu’s version of the global imagination. As with Trilling, there is also a self-consciously pedagogical aspect to this style of critical intervention, with Palumbo-Liu remarking on how he regularly teaches a course titled ‘Comparative Fictions of Ethnicity’ at Stanford. My reservation concerns not this teacherly aspect in itself, but the ways the author organises his conceptual material to accommodate it to the more emollient charms of multicultural inclusiveness. Palumbo-Liu himself acknowledges how his title ‘has a strong biblical air and tradition, as it refers to how others can be lead [*sic*] into “the light”, (xi) and the more brutal, edgy aspects of literary posthumanism, of the kind extensively discussed elsewhere by N. Katherine Hayles, are generally absent from this book. *The Deliverance of Others* does of course address factors that cannot comfortably be assimilated within a multiethnic world of ‘comparative fictions’, but the trajectory of its argument favours incorporating these antagonisms within a global commons. Whereas Michael Denning in *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (2004) argued that the dismantling of apartheid at the end of the 1980s was connected structurally to technological and economic changes in South Africa, Palumbo-Liu’s instinctive preference is to instead, like the Gordimer he admires, validate the role of the human imagination and anti-government activism in helping to bring about transformations in the cultural and political landscape.

In seeking in this way to justify the affective and creative power of literature, Palumbo-Liu always runs the risk of sentimentality. This is, I think, an intellectual risk rather than merely a contingent flaw, since the author is intent upon

extrapolating from Adam Smith's theory of sentiment a more extensive arc of global sympathy to which he, in his role as scholar-teacher, attributes both moral and pedagogic purpose. Though Palumbo-Liu is undoubtedly an astute and perceptive critic, the reader might feel with this book that he or she is always in a seminar: in his discussion of particular works, the author characteristically emphasises 'the problematic', (x) the 'key problem', (49) 'the key challenge', (54) the 'interracial problematic'; (66) by contrast, he is not quite so persuasive on the ironic, humorous or manifestly incongruous dimensions of literary narratives. To put this another way, Palumbo-Liu is perhaps better on the ethics than on the aesthetics of fiction: he describes reading as 'a self-reflective act that puts the question of ethics before that of epistemology', (196) and, though this reflexive practice is clearly typical of a certain brand of US higher education, I think it might be argued that it effectively eviscerates the more dislocating and challenging aspects of global culture, turning it instead into something safe for domestic consumption. In his introductory chapter, Palumbo-Liu suggests that one of the key questions for a globalisation impelled by the logic of neoliberalism is 'how do we regulate the influx of otherness so as not to destabilise the system', (5) and *The Deliverance of Others* might be seen as a product of the very system it describes. It seeks to integrate literary aesthetics through what it aptly calls 'a recombinatory poetics' (5) so as to combine, in all senses of that word, the apparatus of the global marketplace with more familiar academic doctrines of liberal sentiment.

Although this is a progressive and ambitious book, then, it also seems in some measure to be an elegiac one. Despite its invocation of futurist forms of technology, the goal of Palumbo-Liu's work is to incorporate this within a rhetoric of accommodation, one that seeks to modernise and update liberal humanist traditions of moral realism by aligning them with wider arcs of global sympathy; indeed, the goal of 'creating an *ethical* global community' (his emphasis) is cited by the author as one of his explicit aims in the book. (xii) This is, of course, to attribute to literature itself a form of agency that Coetzee in particular, seeing himself as the heir of Kafka and Beckett, has always stringently disavowed, and in the end the burden of Palumbo-Liu's argument turns not so much upon how to read literature but why to read it, and the purposes to which such literary sensibilities might be put. This is not to say *The Deliverance of Others* is reductively instrumental in purpose, merely to

suggest it has a pedagogue's eye for how literature might be packaged and consumed by students in today's global academic marketplace. In this sense, Palumbo-Liu projects the familiar persona of a charismatic professor of literature trying to entice you into his class with the promise that the information he will impart to you could help change your life.

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