Poetics and the Politics of Globalization

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> One can refute Hegel (perhaps even St. Paul) but not the *Song of Sixpence*.
> — Northrop Frye, "Conclusion to *A Literary History of Canada*"
>
> How empire permeates! — Dennis Lee, from *Civil Elegies*

What possibilities does globalization open up for literary studies, and more specifically, for our understanding of the politics of the literary today? To put this another way: is it possible to still imagine a social function for literary studies in an era dominated by visual spectacle, the triumph of the private, and the apparent dissolution of the public sphere? To speak of the opening up of new possibilities and even new political functions for literary criticism and poetics today might seem quixotic at best: a tilting against the windmills of a radically transformed society that no longer has much use for the written word. But if we attend carefully to globalization and consider how the practice of literary criticism figures into the contemporary social and political landscape, it seems to me that some unexpected political possibilities emerge. While globalization signals the beginning of many new processes, those of us concerned with language, culture, and politics have often come to take it only as the name for the end of things: the end of democracy, of unmediated experience, of the public sphere, of the experiment (warts and all) called the Enlightenment, and, effectively, of poetry and literature, too. I want to argue that literary criticism and poetics (and literature and poetry) have an essential political role to play in the era of globalization, even if they do so in transformed circumstances. To grasp how and why this is the case, it is necessary first to describe (yet again) what globalization

is (and isn't) and how poetics, literature, and the study of culture fit (or don't fit) into it; and so it is here that I begin.

At the core of Karl Marx's investigation of the operations of capitalism is a sometimes forgotten critique of scholarly methodology: the political economists of his time mistook the *dramatis personae* of the modern economy — owners and workers — as *a priori* ontological categories, rather than as social positions that come into existence only as the result of a specific course of historical development. This methodological 'failure' describes, of course, a more general process of reification that takes place throughout much of contemporary social reality and at many levels: our own creations take on the character of 'natural,' pre-ordained reality in a way that obscures the quotidian character of their invention. Marx's point goes beyond simply criticizing method. For one of the singular inventions of capitalism is the commodity form, which itself ceaselessly, on an ongoing and daily basis, *re-reifies* existing social relations. "The commodity," Marx writes, "reflects the social characteristics of men's own labour as objective characteristics of the products themselves, as the socio-natural properties of these things" (165). The commodity, one might say, acts as an objective reifying force that extends beyond the ideologies of capitalists and capitalism: we *live* this reification, whether we believe the larger social script in which it is embedded or not.

It should come as no surprise that 'globalization' plays an important role in this ongoing narrative of capitalist reification. Just as surely as political economy for Marx, globalization hides reality from us even as it proposes to explain it. Just how does it do so? At first blush, the promise of the term 'globalization' is that it offers us a way to comprehend a set of massive changes (clustered around the economic and social impact of new communications technologies and the almost unfettered reign of capital across the earth) that have radically redefined contemporary experience. These changes cut differently across spheres of social experience *and* areas of scholarly analysis that were imagined previously to be separate (i.e., the economic, the cultural, the social, the political, and so on). And, confusingly, 'globalization' names at one and the same time both the empirical and theoretical novelty of the processes most commonly associated with it: it names both a new reality and the new concept (or set of concepts) needed to make some sense of this reality. It is not surprising that this double role has made it an inherently unstable

and amorphous concept, "used in so many different contexts, by so many different people, for so many different purposes that it is difficult to ascertain what is at stake in … globalization, what function the term serves, and what effects it has for contemporary theory and politics" (Kellner 1). The immense debates that have ranged over what globalization 'is' and what phenomena should (and shouldn't) be included within it, the question of what the 'time' of globalization might be (is it post-1989? the arrival of Columbus in the New World? the explosion of cross-regional trading in the eleventh century?), the issue of the politics of globalization and the possibilities of alternate globalizations to this one — all draw attention to the fact that the empirical realities that the term is meant to capture can potentially be arranged and rearranged in seemingly very different ways. Which is to say: while globalization is at one level 'real' and has 'real' effects, it is also decisively and importantly rhetorical, metaphoric, and even fictional — reality given a narrative shape and logic, and in a number of different and irreconcilable ways.

This characterization of globalization — as an amorphous term for the present, as an analytically suggestive and yet confusing concept that binds epistemology and ontology together, as a term that is potentially all things to all people and can be bent to multiple purposes — makes it sound like the successor to another concept that was intended to do similar kinds of work: postmodernism. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the idea that 'globalization' carries out the periodizing task once assigned to postmodernism, naming the contemporary moment, if with far more attention paid to the material realities, struggles, and conflicts of contemporary reality on a world-wide scale. Globalization can thus appear to be a new and improved version of postmodernism, but one for which the issues of (for instance) the legacies of imperialisms past and present play a constitutive (instead of ancillary) role. But as soon as this connection is ventured, it is clear that globalization is far from a replacement term for postmodernism. The differences between the two terms are instructive, especially with respect to the situation of criticism and poetics at the present time. The postmodern was first and foremost an aesthetic category, used to describe architectural styles, artistic movements, and literary strategies (Anderson), before ever becoming the name for the general epistemic or ontological condition of Western societies — the 'postmodern condition' that Jean-François Lyotard detected in his review of Quebec's educational system (Lyotard). Criticisms of

postmodernism focused on the adequacy of the term as an aesthetic descriptor (wasn't postmodern fiction really just more modernist fiction?), on its overreaching ambition at global applicability (was the 'post' in 'postmodernism' really the same as the one in 'postcolonialism'?), or on the fact that there was far too little attention paid to the historical 'conditions of possibility' of the emergence of the aesthetic and experiential facets of the postmodern, that is, to the fact that postmodern style represented something more primary: the cultural logic of late capitalism (Jameson, *Postmodernism*).

Whatever else one might want to say about globalization, it is clear that the term has little relation to aesthetics, or indeed, even to culture, in the way that postmodernism does. It is meaningless to insist on a global style or global form in architecture, art, or literature. There is no 'globalist' literature in the way that one could have argued that there was a postmodernist one, nor a globalist architecture, even if there are global architects, such as Rem Koolhaas, Frank Gehry, or Zaha Hadid. This can be seen in the fact that we lack even the adjective for such a category — 'global' literature being something very different from postmodern writing, without the immediate implications for form or style raised by the later category. 'World cinema' similarly names a moment rather than a style, though here perhaps one could argue that there has been a broad bifurcation of film into the cinema of the culture industry and the products of a new, globally dispersed avant-garde (Hou Hsiao-hsien, Emir Kusturica, Agnès Varda, etc.); both can claim the title of 'world cinema,' if for wildly different reasons. 'World poetry' names not even a moment in this sense, but simply the poetry of the whole world, samples of which we might expect to find collected in an anthology or reader of the kind that is constructed to be attentive to the differences of nation, region, and locality.

If postmodernism comes to our attention through various formal innovations that prompt us to consider symptomatically what is going on in the world to generate these forms, globalization seems to invert this relationship, placing the emphasis on the restructuring of relations of politics and power, the re-scaling of economic production from the national to the transnational, on the lightspeed operations of finance capital, and the societal impacts of the explosive spread of information technologies. With globalization we thus seem to have suspended what was central to debates and discussions of postmodernism — the

category of representation. Indeed, the contemporary reality named by globalization is meant to be immediately legible in the forces and relationships that are always already understood to be primary to it and to fundamentally constitute it (e.g., transnational economics, bolstered by the changing character of the state, and so on). What the comparison between postmodernism and globalization highlights is that there is not only no unique formal relationship between contemporary cultural production and the cultural-political-social-economic dominant named by globalization, but apparently less reason to look to culture to make sense of the shape and character of this dominant, which can explain itself, and which views culture as little more than a name for just one of the many aspects of commodity production and exchange today. Put another way, globalization seems to have transformed culture on the one hand into mere entertainment whose significance lies only in its exchangeability, or, on the other, into a set of archaic cultural practices that of necessity have little to say about the skylines of Shanghai's Pudong district or the favelas of Rio, other than to render an increasingly mute complaint about a world that has passed it by. If globalization is the postmodern come to self-recognition, it appears in the process to have transformed culture into mere epiphenomenon and to have rendered cultural criticism in turn into a practice now in search of an object, especially as one of its older political functions — making visible the signs and symptoms of the social as expressed in cultural forms — has been eclipsed by history itself.

This analysis might suggest that anxieties about the decline of (a certain vision of) culture in the era of globalization are in fact justified. But there is also another crucial difference between globalization and postmodernism that needs to be pointed to first, which will begin to turn us back to the question of the activity of literary criticism and poetics in relation to globalization. Postmodernism was never a public concept in the way that globalization has turned out to be. The postmodern never made anything more than a tentative leap from universities to the pages of broadsheets, appearing only occasionally in an article on the design of a new skyscraper or in sweeping dismissals of the perceived decadence of the contemporary humanities. By contrast, globalization is argued for by the World Bank, is named in the business plans of Fortune 500 companies, and is on the lips of politicians across the globe; it constitutes official state policy and is the object of activist dissent:

the Zapatistas did not rise up against postmodernism. There is clearly more at stake in the concept of globalization than there ever was with postmodernism, a politics that extends far beyond the establishment of aesthetic categories to the determination of the shape of the present and the future — including the role played by culture in this future.

The public ambition of the concept of globalization makes it clear that there are in fact two broad uses of this concept that need to be separated. Significantly, the confusions over the exact meaning and significance of globalization that has characterized much academic discussion have *not* in fact cropped up in the constitution of globalization's public persona. Far from it. The wide-ranging debate in the academy over the precise meaning of globalization might point to the fact that it is a concept open to re-narration and re-metaphorization, thereby keeping focus, too, on the unstable relationship between the realities the term names and its heuristic role in grappling with this reality. Against this, however, one must consider the function of the widespread public consensus that has developed on what globalization means. This is globalization in its most familiar garb: the name for a process that (in the last instance) is understood as economic at its core. Globalization is in this sense about accelerated trade and finance on a global scale, with everything else measured in reference to this. While one can have normative disagreements about the outcome and impact of these economic forces (does it "lift all boats," bringing prosperity to everyone? does it merely restore the power of economic elites after a brief interval of Keynesianism?), what the public discourse on globalization insists on is, first, the basic, immutable objectivity of these economic processes, and second that these processes now lie at the core of human experience, whether one likes it or not.

It is in this way that the discourse of globalization carries out what has to be seen as its major function: to transform contingent social relations into immutable facts of history. It carries out this reifying function in a novel way. Unlike the categories of the political economists of Marx's time, globalization insists not on the permanence of social classes, but on the coming into being of *new* social relations, technologies, and economic relationships. Yet the overall effect is the same. Old-style political economy reified capitalism by insisting that existing social relations would extend indefinitely and unalterably into the future based on their origins in the very nature of things. New-

style globalization also makes a claim on the inevitability of capitalism and the persistence of the present into the future. However, its necessary imbrication with the 'new' — globalization always being the name for something distinctly different than what came before it — means that it cannot so easily appeal to nature or ontology to insist on the unchanging character of the future. Rather, borrowing a page from Marxism, globalization offers a narrative of the historical development of social forces over time, the slow (now accelerating) transformation of individuals and societies from the inchoate mess of competing and warring nationalisms to a full-fledged global-liberal-capitalist civilization. Thus famously does Francis Fukuyama appropriate the movement of the Hegelian dialectic to capitalist ends, arguing that the lack of alternatives to capitalism signalled by the collapse of communism coincides with the 'end of history' as such: there will only be capitalism from now on, and, of course, it will be everywhere, on a global scale. The erasure of the distinction between globalization as a conceptual apparatus and the name for contemporary reality as such is hardly an accident — or at least no more so than the categories of classical political economy. It is, rather, a political project through and through, meant (in the terms that I have outlined here) to deliberately confuse the potential analytic functions of the concept of 'globalization' with an affirmation of the unchanging reality of global capitalism as both 'what is' and 'what will be.' In changing circumstances that *have* opened up new realities and political possibilities, the public face of globalization aims not only to keep capitalism at the centre of things, but to clear the field of all possible challenges and objections.

How does this account of globalization open up new possibilities for literary criticism and poetics? Perhaps the major response to globalization within literary studies has been to redefine its practices in light of a world of transnational connections and communications. Globalization has often been interpreted as signalling the end of the nation-state and of the parochialisms of national culture. Waking up to the limits of their own reliance on the nation as a key organizing principle, literary studies and poetics have thus come to insist on the need to take into account the global character of literary production, influence, and dissemination. Much of contemporary literary studies have focused correspondingly on the transfer and movement of culture: its shift from one place to another, its newfound mobility, and the challenges of its extraction,

decontextualization, and recontextualization at new sites. At one level, this encounter of criticism with 'globalization' has simply required the extension or elaboration of existing discourses and concepts, such as diaspora, cosmopolitanism, the politics and poetics of the 'Other,' and the language of postcolonial studies in general. For many critics, poetics was already moving towards globalization in any case, or was even there in advance, as suggested by accounts stressing the existence of global literary relations long before the present moment (Greenblatt). There have been other developments as well. There has once again been serious attention to the politics of translation and renewed focus on the institutional politics of criticism, especially the global dominance of theory and cultural criticism by Western discourses (Spivak, Kumar). There have also been new sociologically inspired 'mapping' projects of poetics that have sought to explore how literary and cultural forms have developed and spread across the space of the globe (Casanova, Moretti). Finally, criticism has taken up an investigation of new literary works whose content, at least, criticizes and explores the tensions and traumas produced by globalization — a potentially huge set of works given the fact that globalization is often taken to be coincident with contemporary geopolitics as such. There have been rich critical discoveries in every one of these attempts to take up in criticism and poetics the challenges that are posed by globalization.

Yet however productive and interesting such analyses are, there is nevertheless a way in which they are all too willing to take globalization at face value. They acquiesce to the character and priority of capital's own transnational logics and movements, instead of questioning and assessing more carefully the narrative that underlies them. The critical agenda is thus set by the operations of globalization *qua* global capital; the need for criticism to concentrate its own energies on movement and border-crossings, while not entirely misplaced, comes across as a rearguard manoeuvre to catch up with phenomena that have already taken place at some other more meaningful or important level. In this anxious attempt to claim the terrain of the global and the transnational for culture and criticism, too, the minimized role of culture within the narrative of globalization that emerges out of the comparison of globalization with postmodernism is troublingly reaffirmed, even if this is not the intent of these various and varied new poetics of globalization and culture.

This is not to say that the poetics of globalization described above are without impact or value. It is simply to call attention to the fact that the ideological project called globalization demands other responses that address directly its rhetorical and fictional character, and in particular, the ideological attempt to seal off the future through the assertion of a present that cannot be gainsaid. At one level, such a response would simply be to insistently remind us of the fiction that is the public face of globalization, by calling attention to and exposing the endless employment of rhetoric and metaphor in the struggle over the public's perception of the significance and meaning of the actions of businesses and governments, peoples, and publics in shaping the present for the future, and, indeed, in shaping what constitutes 'possibility' itself. What better practice to do this than poetics, which is characterized by nothing other than its attention to the powerful uses (and abuses) of language in shaping and mediating our encounter with the world?

This is just one possibility, and one which still seems to leave the literary in the dust of globalization by turning poetics into a broader form of cultural criticism, its continued utility being justified only by its usefulness as a tool against ideology. The object of poetics in this case would be the tropes and turns of language used explicitly to shape public perception: 'axis of evil,' 'weapons of mass destruction,' 'democracy,' 'progress,' and even 'development,' 'empowerment' and the like (see Cornwall and Brock). The political possibilities of literary criticism and poetics today are in any case larger and more general than this, if also perhaps less satisfactorily and explicitly definable. I've introduced two senses of globalization: one which remains open to debate and re-narrativization, even about so fundamental an issue as 'when' globalization might be; and another, which seems to know definitively when (now) and what (global trade) globalization is. The second globalization aims to undo and even to eliminate the contradictions and confusions opened up by the first, in order to reassert capitalism's ontological legitimacy. The political possibilities that globalization opens up for poetics can be grasped only by asking the question of why capitalism needs the new rhetoric of 'globalization' at this time. After all, don't the old categories of political economy continue to assert their mystificatory role in the ways that they have for so long?

The negative answer to this question is pointed to in the very instability of the concept of globalization. Its claim to articulate uniquely the

new and the future leaves it open to endless doubts and questions that require its ideological dimensions to be affirmed anew over and over again (for two recent examples, see Tierney and "The New World"). Globalization is breathlessly confident, a master narrative that demands that all other concepts, ideas, and practices be redefined in relation to it. And yet, the insistence of globalization narratives on the absolute priority of the economic also interrupts its legitimacy at the moment it imagines itself as most forcefully asserting it.

In the colonization of the globe by capital, and the simultaneously geographic spread of communication technologies and cultural forms of all kinds, we might imagine that the reign of commodity fetishism, for instance, is affirmed as never before. But as capital reaches the limits of the globe, there is another story emerging which shakes its hold over the future. If the globalization of production has necessitated new narratives of the 'good' of trade liberalization — the 'good' of capital — it is because the complex, dispersed modes of contemporary production have not hidden away the social realities of production in the absent corners of the globe, but have rather drawn ever more attention to the social relations embedded in commodities. In *Capital,* Marx famously writes that "so soon as [a table] steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas" (165). But what tables today dare to evolve out of their wooden brains grotesque ideas or dance of their own free will? They must instead give an account of their productive parentage: from where did they come? How and by who were they made? (by child labourers? By well-paid unionized workers?) For what purpose? Under what conditions? (In sweat shops? On industrial farms? In third-world tax havens?) And at what cost to that ultimate social limit, the environment? Though no less part of the system of exchange, the commodity today can no longer be depended on to buttress capitalism by shielding from view the social relations that create it. The response offered by the narrative of globalization is not to hide these social relations, but to first claim their inevitability, and then to provide a utopic future-oriented claim about a coming global community in which the traumas of the present will be resolved in the fluid shuttling of freely traded goods around the world.

The utopia offered by the dominant narrative of globalization is one

that has to be rejected, perhaps along with the concept itself, which has become so deeply associated with the current drive and desire of capital as to make it now almost impossible to wrest anything conceptually productive from it. The focus should instead be on the production of new concept-metaphors that might open up politically efficacious re-narrativizations of the present with the aim of creating new visions of the future. For all its ubiquity and hegemonic thrust, the instability of the concept of globalization presents an opportunity to do so; and so, far from being sidelined in globalization, there is an opening for creative critical thinking of all kinds to intervene and generate alternatives. It is here that literary and cultural production, and literary criticism and poetics, have roles to play: not only to shock us into recognition of reality through ideological critique, but also to spark the imagination so that we can see possibility in a world with apparently few escape hatches.

This is what is genuinely lacking today: the imaginative vocabulary, the narrative resources through which it might be possible not only to challenge the dominant narrative of globalization, but to articulate alternative modes of understanding those processes that have come to shape the present — and the future. This is often narrowly imagined as a political lack, the absence of a big idea to take the place of state socialism after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the colonization of the Western left by disastrous 'third way' political approaches. The imaginative resources that are needed to shape a new future are, however, necessarily broader — or at least, a new political vision is impossible without a revived poetics of social and cultural experience as well. This evocation of imagination in relation to poetics and the politics of globalization can be read in the wrong way: at best, as an appeal to Arjun Appadurai's still shaky use of 'imagination' in his influential *Modernity at Large*; at worst, as a Romantic, idealist faith in the autonomous origin of ideas and their power to shape reality. What I have in mind is neither of these, but rather Peter Hitchcock's use of 'imagination as process' in his account of the promise of a theoretical manoeuvre that would be able to seize upon the conceptual openings that 'globalization' has generated within capital itself. He writes,

> While there are many ways to think of the globe there is yet no convincing sense of imagining difference globally. The question of persuasiveness is vital, because at this time the globalism most prevalent and the one that is busily being the most persuasive is global

> capitalism. To pose culture alone as a decisive blow to global modes of economic exploitation is idealist in the extreme. Yet, because such exploitation depends upon a rationale, a rhetoric of globalism if you will, so culture may intervene in the codes of that imaginary, deploying imagination itself as a positive force for alternative modes of Being and being conscious in the world. (1)

I want to leave this sense of imagination open and suggestive, and end by discussing briefly one more shift for poetics in relation to globalization. If we are to speak about the imaginary and its powers in the way Hitchcock does, we can do so today only in reference to an aesthetic that is very different than is normally conceptualized. This is an aesthetic that no longer claims its potential political effect by being transcendent to the social, but by being fully immanent to it. A half century or more of literary and cultural criticism has insisted that culture be viewed as part of the social whole — generated out of and in response to its contradictions, its certainties as well as its uncertainties, an exemplar of its division of labour and its use of symbolic forms to perpetuate class differences through the game of 'distinction.' For those invested in a literary or cultural politics premised on a vision of the autonomy of art and culture from social life, the demand to take into account the social character of the literary comes as a loss, as does the more general massification of culture, which seems to announce the draining of the energies of the poem, the novel, the artwork. Insofar as globalization has also been seen as announcing a "prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social real, to the point at which everything in our social life … can be said to have become 'cultural'" (Jameson, *Cultural* 48), it, too, seems to suggest the general decline of the politics of culture. This is no doubt why globalization is construed as a threat to poetics: it is nothing less than mass culture writ large over the face of the globe.

But this is the wrong lesson to draw from the folding of poetics into the social, or of the expansion of culture to encapsulate everything. In his assessment of the politics of the avant-garde, Peter Bürger identifies the contradictory function of the concept of 'autonomy' in the constitution of the aesthetic: it identifies the real separation of art from life, but covers over the social and historical origins of this separation in capitalist society. The aim of the historical avant-garde — and perhaps I could venture to say all artistic movements since Kant — is to reject the deadened rationality of capitalist society through the creation of "a

new life praxis from a basis in art" (49). Bürger suggests that this had already happened by the middle of the twentieth century. Art had been integrated into life, but through the "false sublation" of the culture industry rather than through the avant-garde. In the process, he claims that what has been lost is the "free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable" (54). Yet to see the sublation of art into life through mass culture as 'false' or as a 'loss' requires the affirmation of the problematic autonomy of art from life produced by social divisions that we should be glad to see dissolved. That these divisions have not been dissolved by the culture industry, but have taken new forms, is clear; equally clear, however, should be the fact the ability of culture to conceive alternatives, far from lost, has been diffused across the spectrum of cultural forms, which is why the imaginative capacity I am pointing to can potentially come from anywhere. What an immanent aesthetic lacks that a transcendent one possessed in spades is that revolutionary spirit that animated nineteenth- and twentieth-century politics and culture, in which the right moment or perfect cultural object could — all on its own — shatter the ossified face of social reality. But to this we can only say: good riddance, and welcome in instead a politics and poetics that proceeds uncertainly, through half-measures and missteps, through intention and accident, through the dead nightmare of the residual and the conservative drag of hitherto existing reality on all change, in full view of the fact that nothing is accomplished easily or all at once, or in absence of the collective energies of all of humanity, and through the imaginative possibilities of poetry, yes, but other cultural forms, too.

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