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Planetary in the Global?

Modern Jewish Literature in English

The questions raised by the present volume – including questions of how to acknowledge and emphasize the diversity and particularity of Jewish literatures while at the same time promoting their inclusion in, and recognizing their contribution to, other philologies – are relevant and timely in ways that far exceed the specific context of literature in Jewish languages or by authors identified as Jewish. Arising during a cultural moment when literary studies more broadly, and indeed the humanities and social sciences in general, are grappling with the need for fundamental reorientation and reorganization, they are questions that go right to the heart of how we see the world.

Against a backdrop in which the political and cultural upheavals and realignments of the past three decades have prompted literary studies to turn with increased urgency to questions of globalization, cosmopolitanism and transnationalism, “the decentered case of multilingual Jewish writing” has persuasively been put forward as a “counterpoint to available World Literature models” (Levy and Schachter 2017, 3). Two decades into the twenty-first century, the need for such a model appears more pressing than ever in light of the fact that theoretical shifts towards an idiom of hybridity, fluidity and deterritorialization are considerably further removed from being reflected in a corresponding shift in real-world thought and practice than developments at the end of the twentieth century might have given cause to hope for (see e.g. Appadurai 1996).

Embedded in a transnational, yet locally particular, multilingual and polyphonic network of linguistic and cultural exchange, Jewish writing across the world stands as a “non-universal global” model of a diasporic or deterritorialized configuration at once cosmopolitan and peripheral (Levy and Schachter 2017). Resistant to efforts to distil from it a unifying common denominator or view it as part of a historical continuum, it is a literary complex whose components are connected by “contiguity” rather than “continuity” (Miron 2010). In this, it gestures towards a “planetary” relational system, to borrow Gayatri Spivak’s term, as a multi-centric, pluralizing and deterritorializing alternative to “the center-periphery model of global literary circulation” (Spivak 2003, 73; Levy and Schachter 2015, 93; see also Gilroy 2005, 70).

In this “non-universal global” reading, the term Jewish literature is naturally understood as emerging from “the circuit of modern Jewish languages composed of multiple centers in Asia, Africa, Europe, and North America” (Levy and

Schachter 2015, 93). However, what happens when the Jewish literature in question was written in global English by an author whose work is accepted and acclaimed as part of the Western literary establishment? Can Jewish literature in such an overtly monolingual and apparently non-peripheral form still be considered part of a non-universal-global paradigm? Can it still be taught in a way that offers access to the relationality of collective diversity that marks the transdisciplinary configurations of Jewish literatures in other languages, or taken together? Is it even still Jewish? Or has its Jewishness been subsumed, and any diasporic origin or planetary aspiration erased and displaced, by it being re-embedded in a centre-periphery view that can only stress either a work's global-English majority status or its Jewish minority one, but which struggles to engage with any intersection between the two?

My contribution to this volume will take the form of a short case study to propose that a text's planetary outlook is not insurmountably tethered to what language it was, or was not, written in, or where in the world it was published. Nor is its Jewishness, however we may choose to qualify or quantify this. I shall suggest that the transnational networks of linguistic and cultural exchange that inform the "circuit" of Jewish literatures as a multilingual, polyphonic collective can be identified even in a single work in global English, where the use of global English has been combined with a self-consciously Jewish awareness of its own planetarity, if we learn to adapt our reading practices. A text need not be diasporic or deterritorialized in a physical sense to be able to forge – or for us to be able to read it as forging – "a counter-discourse challenging the temporal and spatial trajectories operative in Eurocentric theorizations of world literature and its history" (Frydman 2014 [2011], 232).

This is emphatically not to suggest that access to Jewish literature should be circumscribed by what is available of it in Anglophone writing. On the contrary, it remains a vital priority to resist the displacement of (not only) Jewish minority languages by the spread of global English. Nor should it be interpreted as an attempt to bestow minority status on what most would take to be an author with mainstream privileges. Rather, it should be taken as an effort to show how even a supposedly mainstream text can be written to unsettle, or can be read as unsettling, the very distinction between majority and minority, centre and periphery, or origin and derivation, and with it any sense of national or cultural hierarchy, and any straightforward understanding of literary roots and "belonging".

The approach I am promoting in this is not at all without precedent. In his thought-provoking piece on the "diaspora" diaspora, Rogers Brubaker, for instance, argues for a de-substantialization of the notion of diaspora, to theorize it not as "a bounded group" but as "a category of practice, project, claim and stance" (Brubaker 2005, 13). There is a risk in adopting the term "diasporic"

for such a category of practice, not least in that the already watered-down concept of diaspora can end up losing all conceptual coherence and become meaningless as an analytical tool (see also Alexander 2017). However, the distinction between “entity” and “stance” deployed by Brubaker, or, more precisely, his expansion of the notion of the diasporic to encompass not just condition but performance, is a useful one (Brubaker 2005, 10).

By analogy with Brubaker, but substituting the concept of “planetaryity” for that of diaspora, the following short reading is designed to show that, even when operating in global English, we can learn to identify and adopt a planetary stance. Planetaryity, in Spivak’s loose definition, resists the homogenizing logic of globalization, as defined by its imposition of “the same system of exchange everywhere” (Spivak 2003, 72). Informed by a methodology of relationality based on “universal alterity” and an “ethics of difference”, planetary thinking “privileges a relational ethos of *cultural* debt”, rather than financial, and so, as Joseph Keith puts it citing Christian Moraru, a debt that “‘worlds’ us by making visible our physical and nonphysical ‘proximity’, our ‘cross-cultural, cross-geographical, indeed, world-scale contacts, juxtapositions, borrowings, and barterings’”, in recognition of the fact that: “‘Whatever I am or become, comes about under the impact of remote, heterogeneous sources, places, and styles’” (Keith 2018, 271–272. Original emphasis.).

In the process, planetaryity asks us to question both our territorial preconceptions and our temporal ones: the spaces we think we inhabit and our (literary) roots and sources, but also the timelines that inform our thinking in the West and which are determined by the “teleological time of Western modernity’s universal narrative of progress, colonial violence, and the linear time of capitalist exploitation” (Cheah 2016, 12). Thus foregrounding heterospatiality and heterotemporality, and identifying the linguistic and cultural plurality that underlies even the seemingly universal and unified global, a planetary approach makes it possible for authors such as the one under discussion here to write back to the imperializing forces of monolingualism, and of a World Literature studies still largely indebted to a nation-state model, apparently from within both.

Crucially, engaging with a text on such planetary terms calls for a way of reading that is not intrinsic but which can be learnt and taught: a form of reading that destabilizes, dislocates and defamiliarizes and which, more than any explicit theme or content, can identify even a text written in universalizing global English as a work of non-universal-global literature.

“Franz Kafka is Dead”

My little case study is built on a very short short story. It is a Jewish story by a Jewish writer. And what makes it a Jewish story by a Jewish writer is not least the fact that it grapples with, and troubles, both components of the statement I just used to describe it. The story is called “Franz Kafka is Dead”:

He died in a tree from which he wouldn't come down. ‘Come down!’ they cried to him. ‘Come down! Come down!’ Silence filled the night, and the night filled the silence, while they waited for Kafka to speak. ‘I can’t,’ he finally said, with a note of wistfulness. ‘Why?’ they cried. Stars spilled across the black sky. ‘Because then you’ll stop asking for me.’ The people whispered and nodded among themselves. They put their arms around each other, and touched their children’s hair. [...] Then they turned and started for home under the canopy of leaves. Children were carried on their fathers’ shoulders, sleepy from having been taken to see the man who wrote his books on pieces of bark he tore off the tree from which he refused to come down. [...] And they admired those books, and they admired his will and stamina. [...] Doors closed to warm houses. Candles were lit in windows. Far off, in his perch in the trees, Kafka listened to it all: the rustle of clothes being dropped to the floor, of lips fluttering along naked shoulders, beds creaking under the weight of tenderness. It all caught in the delicate pointed shells of his ears and rolled like pinballs through the great hall of his mind.

That night, a freezing wind blew in. When the children woke up, they went to the windows and found the world encased in ice. One child, the smallest, shrieked out in delight and her cry tore through the silence and exploded the ice of a giant oak tree. The world shone.

They found him frozen on the ground like a bird. It’s said that when they put their ears to the shell of his ears, they could hear themselves.

Those are 23 sentences of English-language text. Just under 300 words. Since their initial publication, this story, and the book in which it appears, have been translated into 35 further languages. But this global reach obscures the extent to which, even in their present form here, these 300 words of English text are already a profoundly polyglot and polyvocal product of multiple acts of transmission, translation, reading and re-reading. Weaving together at least eight source texts from seven different countries, in English, German, Greek, Hebrew, Polish and Spanish, with Aramaic and Czech hovering in the background, these 300 words of text construct an intertextual network with roots that can be traced back to fourth-century Egypt, and forward to twenty-first-century Brooklyn, New York. It is an intertextual network that engineers a correspondence between two contemporary American-Jewish authors, but it does so via the New Testament, Lurianic Kabbalah, a German philosopher, a Polish modernist, an Argentinian proto-postmodernist, and of course the famous German-speaking Bohemian from the story’s title. In 300 words.

The text in which this passage appears is the 2005 novel *The History of Love* by Nicole Krauss (Krauss 2006 [2005], 116–117). *The History of Love* is a book that summons ghosts. This particular passage, which is presented in the text as an obituary, is at once conjuring and apparently attempting to exorcise Kafka. And it is doing so through a narrator who is meant to channel Polish-Jewish interwar modernist Bruno Schulz.

Thematically, the passage is referencing Kafka's short story "A Hunger Artist" (Kafka 2012 [1922], 56–63). Parents take their children to see Krauss's Kafka up on his perch, admiring "his will and stamina", and his life-as-performance derives its justification from their presence as his audience, but the demand to see him is waning; the audience is growing tired (Krauss 2006 [2005], 117). Like Kafka's hunger artist, he cannot stop performing, even in their absence, yet in their absence, his performance, and his life, cease to be. The form of the passage – the circularity of its reasoning, its parody of the parabolic genre, creating the expectation of a parable but frustrating exegesis – is also one familiar from Kafka's own writing.

Stylistically, the passage recalls Schulz. The imagery – the personification of night, the spilling stars and canopy of leaves, fathers carrying their half-asleep children, the descriptions of touch, tenderness and intimacy – all of this is Schulzian, not Kafkaesque. The man-as-bird perched on high may be evoking Kafka's self-stylization, via Czech, as a bird, and the element of metamorphosis, but it is also a trope familiar from Schulz stories (Schulz 2008 [1934 / 1937]).

The references to shattering and the extraction of light from the material world, meanwhile – evoked in the image of the child exploding the ice of the oak tree and causing the world to shine – are references that derive neither from Schulz nor from Kafka directly but from Jewish mysticism, if again through a reading of Schulz, as well as of Jorge Luis Borges, and via an intertextual route that also takes in Friedrich Nietzsche and more Kafka, before ending up at Philip Roth.

Let me just unravel that a bit: According to kabbalistic cosmology, the universe came about because God drew in his divine light to leave a void for the creation of the world, but the vessels God formed to hold his light were unable to contain it and shattered, dispersing sparks of divine light, trapped in shards of broken vessels, across the world. By releasing the scattered sparks from their imprisonment, humanity may participate in the repair and redemption of the world.

In Schulz's fiction, this cosmological myth is an important recurring trope, but he secularizes and refigures it – as indeed does Borges – so that it reads as an illustration of intertextuality: Schulz envisages the origin of creation as an absent source text from which all meaning emanates, known simply as The

Book with a capital “B”. The original Book having long since disintegrated and been dispersed – in a process analogous to the shattering of the vessels – all that is left behind are disseminated text fragments or palimpsests. Any books written since the dispersal of The Book are, according to Schulz, exilic and can only ever hope to be a pale imitation of this original source text, but, as pale imitations, they may nevertheless be animated by sparks of divine inspiration.

In Krauss’s refiguration of Schulz’s refiguration, this connection to intertextuality is left implicit. It is only suggested, fittingly enough, through intertextual allusion, in the evocation of Schulz, but also, as we shall see, in a connection to Borges, and by means of a passing nod to Nietzsche.

The act of shattering, followed by an emanation of light, is an act performed in this passage by the voice of a female child, a young female who, in the process, takes over from the famous author whose light and voice have been extinguished. Read through Schulz’s reimagining of the creation myth as a process of intertextuality, and reinforced by the Nietzschean echo of the obituary’s title – “Franz Kafka is Dead” – “Gott ist tot” –, which also underlines the New Testament association of Christ being called down, in vain, from the cross, or tree, to prove his divinity – this might suggest a reading in which Kafka has withdrawn himself to make space for the younger female’s act of re-creation, leaving sparks of his former light behind as glimpses of his original inspiration. On this analogy, Kafka, in his quasi-divinity, may have written The Book, but Krauss can write a book in his image, animated by sparks of his inspiration. She may even write a book to act as “the axe for the frozen sea inside us”, as, in a further intertextual nod to Kafka, the image of shattered ice might also be taken to suggest (Kafka 1977 [1904], 16).

But the analogy does not end there. In the story, the act of shattering is attributed not to the divine light itself but to the girl’s response to it – to her delight – and her linguistic enactment of that delight. Read in conjunction with the implicit ambition of writing a book to shatter Kafka’s ice for him, this suggests that the dividing line between the divine and the mere mortal, between precursor and successor, or inspiration and derivation, is being blurred. And the pressure of following in the footsteps of the “divine” – of being worthy of hearing herself in “the delicate pointed shell of his ears” – this pressure is underlined intertextually by the question that follows from Nietzsche’s madman’s pronouncement about God being dead and us having killed him: the question of whether the “greatness of this deed” may be such that we “murderers of all murderers” must “ourselves [...] become gods simply to appear worthy of it” (Nietzsche 1974 [1882], 181–182 (sec. 125)).

So from the outset, from its very title, this passage seems to resonate with an anxiety of influence: a tension between exorcising and summoning, or toppling

(from the perch) and self-investiture. This is a tension that we encounter in much contemporary Jewish writing conscious of the weight of its heritage in a historical, a familial and a literary sense, where more general fears of not living up to the authors of one's past are coupled with more specific anxieties relating to what it means to live and write as contemporary Jews, and contemporary post-Holocaust Jews, and, in the case of Krauss, as a contemporary female American-Jewish author.

Indeed, Krauss's piece also reads as a response to a canonical contemporary American Jew and to *his* intertextual engagement with Kafka: to Philip Roth and particularly to his response to Kafka's "Hunger Artist" story, a response titled "'I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting'; or, Looking at Kafka", from 1973 (Roth 2001 [1973]). As with Krauss's other intertextual connections, this one too appears marked by an interplay between affirmation and disavowal. Roth's Hunger Artist piece also reads as an obituary of sorts and imagines Kafka in 1924, the year of his death, and in his relationship with Dora Dymant, a young Jewish woman of nineteen in whose company Roth pictures Kafka, for a brief while, at peace and almost liberated, writing, and learning Hebrew from Dymant, and encouraging her to pursue a career as an actress. One strand of Roth's piece ends with Kafka's death and with Dymant inconsolably lamenting his loss.

By creating her own version of Roth's story, Krauss could be seen to be attempting to legitimize herself as a modern American-Jewish author, shoring up her own credentials by aligning herself with a canonical contemporary, and in doing so also attempting to step out from under the shadow of the mighty canon of seemingly more "authentic" old-world Jewish writing, to claim a place for herself among the cosmopolitan contemporary (Jewish-)American mainstream. Roth offers a template for a redemptive, mutually inspiring relationship between Kafka and a younger female, a relationship in which he fosters her creative impulses and she liberates his creative drive, which sanctions the blurred precursor-successor model Krauss seems to be hinting at in her piece. However, the blurring of precursor and successor is not just adapted from Roth but also applied to him, which becomes visible when we read it across the eighth strand in Krauss's intertextual warp and weft, the strand in which she summons Borges.

Borges is in the background of a great deal of what Krauss has written, and there is much triangulated contact between her, Borges and Schulz, arising, as has already become apparent, from a kabbalistically inspired reading of the universe as intertext, or hypertext, which in all three authors gives rise to a wealth of imagery relating to infinite books, infinite libraries, and other textualized multiverses. Indeed, *The History of Love* as a whole reads like an attempted approxi-

mation of Borges's "Book of Sand", a theoretically infinite book with no beginning and no end (Borges 2001 [1975], 89–93).

But there is also a great deal of confluence between Krauss, Borges and Kafka, and I use the term confluence, rather than influence, consciously here, since it is particularly relevant to how Krauss deploys Borges against Roth in the passage we are looking at. What Borges has perhaps most crucially supplied Krauss with in this context are the reflections that underpin his 1951 piece titled, fittingly, "Kafka and his Precursors", an essay in which Borges has, as it were, "written the book" on anxiety of influence, or intertextuality, and which famously contains the lines: "In the critics' vocabulary, the word 'precursor' is indispensable, but it should be cleansed of all connotation of polemics or rivalry. The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors" (Borges 2000 [1962], 236).

Over a decade earlier, in 1939, Borges had already given literary form to aspects of this idea in his short story "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*", another fictitious obituary (Borges 2000 [1962], 62–71). In "Pierre Menard", the eponymous protagonist is an author who has recreated, line for line, Cervantes's famous *Don Quixote*, but despite the fact that his version is therefore identical, it is deemed, by the narrator, to be the much richer work for having been written in the twentieth century, since this means that it has to be read against the backdrop of everything that has happened since the seventeenth century of its original creation. And the logical and temporal inversion implicit in the idea of "creating one's own precursors" is taken further still in both Borges's Kafka essay and in Krauss's Kafka obituary, to suggest a more general destabilization of literary influence, where the precursor is shaped by the successor, in the act of being read.

Therein also lies Krauss's response to Roth, a response that sees her rewrite a crucial aspect of his story and, in the process, differentiate herself from both him and Kafka: in Roth's version, it is Kafka who encourages his female companion to be creative, and his formative influence turns her into who she will become. In Krauss, it is the younger female's creative response to his influence that allows him to become who he was meant to be: his light shines because of her delight.

In her most recent publication, the 2017 novel *Forest Dark*, Krauss turns this whispered intertextual response to Roth into a book-length text that sees her emphatically distance herself from any sense of unidirectional influence and passive inheritance (Krauss 2017). In it, she takes up the other strand of Roth's Kafka essay, which raises the question of what might have happened to Kafka had he not died in 1924, and she projects a version of events in which Kafka escapes to Mandatory Palestine, thus putting him in a position where he will have a transmigrational encounter with one version of a fictionalized Krauss herself in

twenty-first-century Israel. This ultimately allows Krauss to go some way towards putting the spectre of both Kafka and Roth to rest and distinguish herself both within and from what in the novel is referred to as “the great machine of Jewish literature”, while at the same time firmly emphasizing the connections between this great machine and non-Jewish world literature by cross-reading Kafka against Dante, and vice versa, displacing both from their familiar contexts in the process (Krauss 2017, 125).

Of the two of Krauss’s works referenced here, *Forest Dark* may be the more intentionally planetary for being consciously conceived as a multiverse constructed on, and out of, “juxtapositions, borrowings, and barterings” across time and space, and languages, cultures and creeds (in Keith 2018, 272; for a more in-depth reading of *Forest Dark* see Gwyer 2018). However, the planetary scope and movement of Krauss’s writing are already clearly evident in “Franz Kafka is Dead”. In 300 words of a tightly constructed intertextual network, Krauss is not just writing a fictitious obituary to help her manage an anxiety of influence; she is (de-)situating herself as a modern female Jewish author in relation to both “old-world”, and contemporary American, Jewish writing, against a backdrop of diaspora and persecution, and a foreground of a cosmopolitan (and male-centric) mainstream represented by Philip Roth whom at least one obituary has labelled “the great novelist of modern America” (Freeman 2018). And while all these contexts and influences have come together to determine who Krauss is, or how she may be perceived, she at the same time finds herself peripheral to, or displaces herself from, all of them. So her alignment with each of these precursor authors is always also a form of differentiation: a de-essentializing process of locating the self by decentring and deterritorializing it, and a nomadic process of dislocating borders and boundaries, both in and through her writing, boundaries between cultures, between languages, even while writing in global English, between canons, between dominant Judaeo-Christian Western culture and diaspora, but also between diaspora and Israel, to find a home in the interstitial, and the intertextual, but a home that is forever in flux—or planetary.

At the same time, hers is a process that also de-essentializes and dislocates her precursor figures, in a dynamic that is reinforced by the fact that it is achieved through the medium of postcolonial Borges, an author who occupies a similarly marginal position to the literary canon he inherits as many Jewish writers do to theirs. Far beyond simply being a way of managing an anxiety of influence, Krauss’s 300 words bring out the planetary potential of modern Jewish writing in and for a world-literary context. In its extended illustration of intertextuality, her piece urges a fluidly comparative reading in which each of her multiple contexts and “sources” is repeatedly decontextualized and decentred

by being read against all the others, thus disrupting any sense of unidirectional linearity or hierarchy in any sense, historical, geographical or influential.

So what do we stand to gain from separating the planetary stance of a text from its genetic context and its thematic content? Jewish writing has recently received a fair amount of critical attention on a global stage, particularly in postcolonial studies, where there has been a push by scholars such as Paul Gilroy, Aamir Mufti or Bryan Cheyette to bridge disciplinary segregation by conceptualizing both Jewish and postcolonial studies as representatives of a greater “transcultural diasporic imagination” (Cheyette, 2013, xii; see also Gilroy 1993 or Mufti 2007). However, while we are, in the wake of this Holocaust turn in postcolonial studies, now witnessing a significantly increased focus on what Mufti has called the “metaphorical possibilities of Jewishness for contemporary postcolonial culture” (Mufti 2007, 25), this focus has predominantly been on the content and context of Jewish writing and culture, rather than its forms. Within these parameters, it is difficult to see beyond the Jewish model as one of a history of suffering and instead think of it as partaking of a “multidirectionality” of memory (Rothberg 2009), let alone recognize it as a constituent of a present-day mode of planetary thinking and writing. Yet it is the planetary as stance and methodology that holds the key to truly multidirectional thought and practice.

To conclude, by illustrating a mode of thought that allows parallels, cross-connections and contact zones to emerge – without eliding difference – both across the transnational, transcultural, translingual networks of Jewish literature’s own field, and as a potential protean template for boundary-troubling thought and literature more globally, the miniature case study presented here operates as a plea for a reading of Jewish literature as planetary and for a planetary reading of (Jewish) literature. Rather than merely ask how we can make Jewish studies a more integral component of other disciplines, we should perhaps at the same time be exploring how to foreground the extent to which Jewish studies are already integral to, or certainly indicative of, what it might mean to think comparatively on a global scale, as planetary subjects. Because 300 words of text can be a multilingual, polyphonic world in a grain of sand. But they can also be a microcosm pointing to a way of seeing a planet beyond.

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