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EXPLORING QUICKSAND. TRANSLATION CRITICISM AND LITERARY CRITICISM IN THE FACE OF THE PETRIFICATION OF CONTEMPORARY WORLD LITERATURE¹

Abstract

In contemporary discussions on the condition and further perspectives of World Literature the moods of disappointment and disillusionment seem to dominate. Reservations concern World Literature in its complexity – its canon, potential multilingualism, existing hierarchies and often contradictory conceptualizations. The crisis of World Literature is not, however, the result of any given scandal, but rather of many years of progressive petrification resulting in actual monolingualism, formulaic narrative patterns, consolidation of the center-periphery hierarchy and abandonment of the real pluralism of interpretation. One of the areas that seems to meet the challenge of World Literature is undoubtedly translation criticism. Therefore, the aim of the article is to reflect on how contemporary theories and conceptualizations of World Literature as well as its far-fetched utopia can benefit from translation criticism’s input. The article also argues that translation criticism may become a field that dynamizes contemporary World Literature and restores its reordering or even revolutionary potential.

Keywords: literary criticism, translation criticism, World Literature, comparative literature, global literature

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Introduction

The shortest answer to the question of what distinguishes the concept of World Literature from other literary studies was given almost two decades ago by Kate McInturff, who wrote that, unlike comparative studies that look for differences, it is mainly focused on “a sphere of common cultural influence” (2003: 225). The perspective adopted by McInturff seems justified both when we look at the Goethean concept of *Weltliteratur* and when we recall contemporary critics who do not reject universalism as a cultural paradigm. Post-colonial and feminist perspectives, as well as criticism expressed by ethnic and gender and sexual minorities, became divergent impulses for the further development of the field. The voices of scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Suman Gupta have enabled an insight into how much the stability of global literature has in fact been its greatest weakness. The process of revealing the deep structures of domination, the superficial universalism and false diversity in a world dominated by a linguistic and cultural hegemon was the reason why a large group of authors began questioning the future of World Literature and their own contribution to this field. For example, *An Essay Against Global Literature: Literature and the Global Public* by Duncan McColl Chesney and *Against World Literature. On the Politics of Untranslatability* by Emily Apter, are just some of the voices in favor of abandoning this discredited utopia. As it would be too arduous to discuss most of the arguments raised by these authors, it might be an unjustifiable generalization to identify the crisis status of World Literature. Zhang Longxi states:

There is no doubt that world literature is on the rise and gathering momentum in literary studies everywhere today, not just in the USA and Europe, but also in China, Korea, India, Turkey, Brazil, and many other countries in other parts of the world. (Longxi 2018: 171)

One could even argue that the actual worlding and multilingualism of World Literature's research have revealed assumptions and hierarchies which are not always accepted outside Western academia. Even more puzzling, the unquestionable growth of diversity in the field seems to be prompting the subjects located close to the hegemonic position to recognize the state of crisis. I am sure that neither Apter nor Chesney would agree with this characterization of their position. The authors' critical self-reflection seems

to protect their declarations against such assessments; nevertheless, it seems questionable to accept their concerns and skepticism without some form of probing and scrutiny.

In the following article I will reflect on the prospect of a more significant involvement of translation criticism and literary criticism in the fulfillment of the idea of World Literature. I will deliberate on how the two forms of criticism can perform alongside each other, and indeed supplement one another, in the face of the challenges of World Literature. Additionally, I will reflect on how the interpretation of a translation can foster literary diversity, both in terms of mono- and multilingualism. Finally, I will consider how the perspective of translation criticism and literary criticism may allow us to occasionally look beyond academic circles and observe other arenas in which World Literature flourishes. In the following article I mostly avoid revisiting the metaphor of exploring quicksand used in the title. Nevertheless, I would like to show how reading practice, not limited to literary theory, can reveal a peculiar paradox: terms such as expectedness, finality, stability, predictability, certainty, knowledge, examination and even literary system should not be considered as tributes to the development of World Literature, but rather as alarms that prompt us to search for literature that is available and readable in translation.

Borderlines between translation criticism and literary criticism

Currently, the challenges related to translation do not bypass any of the spheres of literary, academic and critical activity. As Magda Heydel states,

the leitmotif of the cultural turn is to redefine the research field and move in translation studies from strictly delineated and closed areas to multidisciplinary and open spaces, as well as from a prescriptive attitude perceiving the theory of translation as a set of critical tools and a toolbox of translation evaluation criteria for a descriptive attitude, i.e. a description of specific texts that exist and function in their contexts, the problematization of which can serve as the basis for the formulation of certain norms. (Heydel 2009: 22)²

² If the name of the translator is not mentioned in the bibliography, the translation of non-English sources is by me – O.S.

It seems that the descriptive interpretative model is more epistemologically fertile. Reviewing and assessment as functions of translation studies do not evaporate, but they cease to be central to the narrowly understood evaluation.³ With the development of the field, however, the critical edge of reviewers and essayists writing about translation has not been blunted (Balcerzan 1999: 25–26); polemics often take on an intense form, and the participants in it often propose their own translations in place of those they have maligned (Balcerzan 1999: 34–36). In the Polish context, this is probably due to the large representation of translators among translation critics, as well as the overlaps between the translator's profession and other professions (Fordoński 2012: 101). The additional reason for such a state of intense discussion and competition is also the widely shared conviction in Polish translation criticism circles that translation is a type of literary work that can never be considered complete. Thus, one can observe an expansion of the field of translation criticism, a change in proportions and principles in the evaluation and interpretation of a translation, and finally a variety of critical perspectives and forms of expression. Diversity includes both the media used for communication as well as the style of communication and the range of topics covered.

The development of translation criticism also affects related fields, the indication of which can be observed in recent Polish publications straddling literary criticism and translation. The abovementioned borderline between translation criticism and literary criticism can be defined in three different ways, although I am sure that if other criteria were considered even more variants might be available. In these three proposals, however, I would like to emphasize the different proportions of translation and literary criticism that can be recognized in these variants. The axiological dimension of critical practice seems to be less significant, although I would not be inclined to explicitly distinguish between interpretative and evaluative perspectives, as proposed, for example, by Ewa Kraskowska (2018: 53–54). She refers to the English-language tradition and considers literary criticism as literary studies rather than a wide range of popular literary reviewing and interpretative practices as understood in Polish culture.

³ An example of this process can be seen in an article written by Marta Skwara entitled *(Mis)translation as a Literary Success* (2019), which, although not as radical as one might hope after the publication of Jacek Halberstam's pop-theoretical book, *The Queer Art of Failure* (2018), is a sign of a turning point in translation criticism.

The first definition of the borderline of literary and translation criticism could adopt a very broad approach. For example, the parameters of both fields might include all critical genres that discuss literature not originally written in the critics' mother tongue but rather translated versions. This option, however, falls short, mainly because the definition also includes critical strategies that camouflage the actual translation. Indeed, Katharina Reiss observes that "[t]he author is judged solely by proxy, via the translator, in absentia and without the fact even being mentioned" (Reiss 2000: 2). From a World Literature perspective, this would be a counter-effective strategy, which dismisses the multilingualism of global literature in favor of its forged monolingualism.

The second proposal responds to the challenges of World Literature more comprehensively. It considers the above definition as the borderline of these areas with one significant specification: the translation or the foreign language of the text becomes itself the subject of reflection. In other words, a literary work is discussed as a translation, while a critical reading not only reveals that it is a text with such status, but also treats it as a direct or indirect object of reflection. This variant seems to me the most promising, because it allows, on the one hand, to present translation reflection on a different scale, in various textual forms, while taking into account the various specializations of critics.⁴ On the other hand, it also permits translation to leave the space of nihilistic taboo, allowing it to be considered thus: since we cannot⁵ offer translation criticism on a high level of specialization, any reflection on translation carries no value. In other words, the fact that the literary text is translated would be worth noting insofar as it can itself be the subject of scholarly reflection. On a different level of assessment, then, considering the translation as a translation would be a kind of open secret. Yet the unorthodox nature of this solution can also be considered its weakness. This model does not allow for a specific scale or criteria of translation reflection, nor does it define the conditions that must be met by the subject entering the discussion. Therefore, this proposal concerns not so much translation

⁴ Among other issues that have repeatedly been the subject of lively discussions, the question whether translation criticism is permissible without knowledge of the original text and its language remains crucial.

⁵ We cannot or do not want adapt this perspective for various reasons – linguistic competences, the character of the medium or even the number of words permissible for an article, the editorial politics or knowledge about the preferences of the audience, as well as other topics that seem to be more interesting when discussing a given text.

criticism as the borderline of critical literary and critical translation reflection in the perspective of World Literature. It is a model dependent both on the shape of a given literary culture, its specificity and tradition, as well as on the changing canon of contemporary World Literature. In the process of revising the literary canon, the revision of existing critical hierarchies and the selection of the texts under discussion seem to be particularly valuable.

In the third variant, the position of critical borderlines would make it possible to use the achievements or tools of the neighboring field and – importantly – to disclose this appropriation in one's text. We come across this borderline understanding whenever translation critics are seduced by the temptation to discuss literature in terms of reviewing, for example when they risk expressing a judgment not only focused on the value of the translation, but also on the literary work itself. Or, simultaneously, when such literary critics also read the literary piece in its original language and then use any ensuing reflections on its translation as part of their interpretation and judgment.⁶ This variant seems the easiest to propose and defend against criticism. Nevertheless, in the face of the challenges posed by World Literature, I would agree with a reflection by Peter Newmark, who claims that in translation

[n]othing is purely objective or subjective. There are no cast-iron rules. Everything is more or less. There is an assumption of 'normally' or 'usually' or 'commonly' behind each well-established principle; as I have stated earlier, qualifications such as 'always', 'never', 'must' do not exist – there are no absolutes. (Newmark 1988: 21)

I would consider applying this observation not only to translation practice, but also to the aforementioned cross-border analysis of foreign literature. It seems that in the face of multilingual, polycentric, contemporary World Literature, it would be advantageous to establish the borderline of criticism, which recognizes various (and from different sources) strategies and forms of reflection on literature in translation as belonging to this field. As Małgorzata Łukasiewicz, a translator, stated in an interview:

⁶ Of particular interest are cases when a critic wants to defend a book in the eyes of the readers against, in their opinion, a poor translation, which does not do justice to their assessment of an otherwise outstanding work. This is an interesting case, insofar as the judgment of the critic concerning the novel itself could be somehow contradicted and opposed by a reader who would experience cognitive dissonance (a high rating, for example, of a novel, which turns out to be unappealing in their reading).

Let us imagine that translation criticism exists, is vigilant and is a developed branch of literary life. Criticism of the translation of my dreams [...] is a very serious journey into the depths of the literary work. In-depth, because it does not stop on the surface, on the plot, on ideas and characters. It reaches down to the bottom, to the matter of the word. Shows how it is made. Such a critique of a translation is an excellent interpretation of literature, that is, in fact, a very good way of practicing literary criticism in general. (Łukasiewicz, Zaleska 2015: 164–165)

Reflection on literary language, or even the language itself, is undoubtedly one of the most important reference points for in-depth criticism – both for translation criticism and literary criticism. When we refer to World Literature, both of these fields go not only hand in hand, but in many cases overlap to form a borderline sphere.⁷ A similar view is outlined by Tomasz Swoboda:

Translation criticism, as the name suggests, is based on criticism. And yet, although it cannot manage without criticizing, it tries to become like its sister, literary criticism, which does not need to criticize – it prefers to analyze and interpret. (Swoboda 2014: 6)

It seems, therefore, that critics from both fields emphasize different practices and values rather than creating opposing views or discursive distinctions. One could even argue that both disciplines can jointly create (if this is not already the case) a field of critical discussion concerning World Literature.⁸ In this context, it is worth asking: under what conditions could translation criticism be included in general criticism, especially in the face of challenges posed by contemporary World Literature? And what enhancements can it bring both to translation and literary criticism?

⁷ Tomasz Pindel, a translator, reveals a peculiar ambivalence in this respect. On the one hand he laments the negligible and far from “professional translation criticism” (Pindel 2009: 254) interest in translation issues among the reviewers of the literary magazine “Nowe Książki”. On the other hand he looks at literary criticism with a certain level of melancholy. For example, the author emphasizes the expertise of Jerzy Jarniewicz, a translator and literary critic, and praises the high quality of his essays on translation, but, again, calls it an elite practice and sees his essays as unrepresentative of contemporary criticism as exemplified by the popular press. One gets the impression that the author assumes the existence of an ideal state of translation criticism, currently unattainable.

⁸ It is worth noting that literary criticism has served to perpetuate stereotypes, prejudices and colonial patterns. For instance, see Dorota Gołuch’s interesting viewpoint (Gołuch 2016: 46–70).

Translation culture in the context of World Literature

Apart from the notion of literary culture, which creates a modal framework for literary criticism, translation culture plays a key role, even if not always analyzed in detail. In the perspective adopted by Lawrence Venuti, this is a postulation addressed primarily to English-speaking researchers and authors of literature. However, this concept is formulated so broadly that it can be transferred to other linguistic contexts:

We lack a discourse about translating that can foster and sustain what I would like to call a translation culture, a culture where translated texts are knowledgeably written and read, taught and studied, recognized as works that are not simply distinct from the source texts they translate but vital to the receiving culture and to its ongoing exchanges with various foreign cultures. If we lived in a translation culture as I am imagining it, translators would simultaneously learn how to translate and how to comment on translations in compelling ways. (Venuti nd)

The important role assigned not only to translation researchers and critics, but also to readers (of literature and academic monographs), means that in this variant of literary culture, academic knowledge or the specialist education of translators is highly valued. As Zofia Ziemann notes, this variant of translation criticism is capable of “demonstrating how much happens in the translated text, how far-reaching changes take place in the original text, how even minor shifts, whether lexical-semantic or formal-stylistic, affect the shape of the whole and finally – what are the implications” (Ziemann 2015: 298). Discussing Tomasz Swoboda’s book, Ziemann claims that “it presents a perfect link between more scientific or theoretically oriented discussions of translated texts, whose terminology may act as a deterrent to an unaccustomed reader, and traditional essayistic literary criticism” (Ziemann 2015: 307). Indeed, taking into account the perspective of readers who do not necessarily have the same or comparable interpretative competencies is a key declaration. I am not convinced that Swoboda’s essays are as accessible as Ziemann states, but it seems that the author has risen to the challenge of building a bridge between literary and translation criticism.

Furthermore, in-depth analyses of the language and contexts of translation of individual writers can offer substantial readings for critics rooted in both fields. In particular, I would highlight Swoboda’s essay on Emil

Cioran's languages, or various statements by Sława Lisiecka concerning her work on the translations of Thomas Bernhard. Polish translation culture is only just emerging and therefore works such as the collection of essays by Swoboda, two volumes by Jerzy Jarniewicz, and a new book by Tadeusz Sławek (to mention only non-academic publications) create foundations for further research. It is worth highlighting that such publications do not necessarily point to the development of an autonomous field of reflection on foreign-language literature, but rather they act as a component dynamizing the entire literary culture. One could therefore speak of a variant of the model, which Kinga Dunin describes as "literature in Poland" (Dunin 1994) as an alternative to the differentiation between Polish and foreign literature in Polish translation. Although this proposal engenders additional questions, for example concerning the consequences of a greater emphasis on geographic rather than linguistic borders, it seems to reflect the essence of cultural transformation since 1989.

As a result of discussing the issue of common ground occupied by literature in the original language and in translation, we face a different issue of critical practice in the face of translation culture. Mainstream literary criticism, that is reviews in popular magazines and newspapers directed at the non-specialized reader, is required to discuss topics such as the formation of a literary text and its embedded structures (world view, assumptions, contradictions, contexts revealed by the language of translation) to only a very limited extent. Often, various forms of "positioning" of a literary piece on the map of contemporary literature seem to be accorded more importance: for example, the circumstances of the publication, the reasoning behind the publication of the translation, the occasional controversy or the success of its publication, the plot outline, the psychological development of the characters or the socio-political circumstances, and, last but not least, the author's or characters' dilemmas. This is probably the key point when it comes to critical practice at the heart of translation culture. I consciously use foreign prose as the default literary case – since it is here that there is the least space (or the least space editors are prepared to grant) for reflections on the linguistic shape of any given literary work. In consequence, the marginalization of poetry in popular magazines and on websites should not come as a surprise – linguistic reflection plays a leading role in poetry criticism, even if it is woven into contextual reflection. And yet translation criticism cannot be complete without a linguistic discussion, since it largely consists in analyzing the literary text that appears in the target language. It would be unreasonable to

reduce the wide range of methods and reading styles recognized in translation studies in this way. We should take into account various theoretical and meta-critical inspirations as well as consider other perspectives such as the translation market, working conditions, and the socio-cultural roles assumed by translators (Jarniewicz 2012: 23–33). Rather, my point is that translation criticism is particularly inspiring when it covers dimensions of a literary text that are not accessible to most readers who each read World Literature with a different sensitivity, expertise and erudition.

Only within the confines of an extensive critical literary discussion, in which readers not just with different specializations but also status participate, is it possible to move beyond general, perfunctory, or even commonplace reflections. A similar problem was diagnosed by Elizabeth Hardwick in her pugnaciously critical essay in “Harper’s Magazine” – a diatribe against mediocre criticism which, she claims, serves the purpose of killing off literature. Paradoxically, however, this state of prolonged dying is rather a result of withdrawing from expressive judgments and extensive interpretative commentaries and reviews rather than as a result of Zoilus’s bloodthirsty attacks (Hardwick 1959). It could be argued that it is only a departure from commonsense, vague readings following the worldview of a realistic novel that might lead to noteworthy reflections. The lack of unconditional acceptance of the convention that Catherine Belsey aptly calls the “tautology” of realism (Belsey 1980: 46) allows for an in-depth interpretation of the language of the novel and the worldview. In fact, critical practice allows us to transcend the mind-numbing banality “that what is being said must be true because it is obvious, clear and familiar” (Belsey 1980: 4). The horizon of interest, both in the case of literary criticism focused on interpretation, and translation criticism, concerns, therefore, a deep understanding of language – its shades, functions, and fluctuating meanings; interpretations that make us aware of the overused quote from Mallarmé: “But my dear Degas, poems are made of words, not ideas!” Moreover, proving this fact does not have to take the form of boring lectures on poetics.⁹

Although thoroughly banal – at least for every literary researcher, translator and critic – an acknowledgment of the linguistic status of a text is not

⁹ In an essay entitled “Critic’s Manifesto”, Daniel Mendelsohn confesses that his cultural and literary sensitivity has not been shaped by school education, but mostly by literary criticism, making him aware that poetry is not “pretty much anything about “feelings”.” (Mendelsohn 2012).

often evident in popular reviews. This is largely due to what I would call an advancing one-off criticism. By this, I mean limiting reading practice to merely glancing at one or – if we are lucky – a handful of reviews devoted to a given literary work. Each critic, therefore, tries to provide the fullest possible context for the novel, to define its genre, the status of the author in contemporary culture, basic associations and intertexts, and finally explain why they believe readers should be interested in this particular literary work. Interpretation of the language of the novel in such cases often exceeds the volume of reviews or essays accepted by magazines. What is more, especially in comparison with this basic information, such detailed interpretations could be considered tedious and over-scholarly, which seems to be related to contemporary anti-elitist populism. Nonetheless, the complex problem of various interests and needs can be presented in a fairly simple equation: the wider the group of critics, interpreters and readers involved in critical discussions, the greater the room for expanding the interpretation. What is basic and known to everyone in the context of a given publication does not constantly need to be explained, introduced and, most importantly, repeated.

Shifting the emphasis of critical reflection from – let me simplify this issue a little – language to context and plot is at least partially the result of the increasing importance of World Literature and, at the same time, the diminishing role of criticism. It is of course obvious that the reader should be “made acquainted with” an author and their culture by the critic, as well as potentially important social issues, especially when it comes to languages, cultural differences, or literary perspectives, which are unlikely to be known to a new audience. To be fair, one cannot blame mainstream reviewing and the poor reader struggling with the challenges of the modern world for the state of literary criticism and translation criticism. It seems that the most influential theorists in the field of contemporary World Literature are also responsible for this deadlock. It is almost impossible not to think that a departure from banal and vague interpretations is pie in the sky if cataloging works of World Literature to obtain a full picture of the system of World Literature or recognizing the general conventions of the contemporary novel remains our central ambition (Moretti 2000).

Deepening and expanding interpretation requires not only a text space to be developed (it is a painfully prosaic issue critics deal with in everyday practice), but also risks getting lost in the text. Take, for example, the discovery that a personal story from halfway around the world is not as familiar to us as a novel’s blurb would claim. Moreover, selling copyrights “to 28 countries

before the book's official premiere" (Cummins 2020: 1) does not necessarily warrant undermining prevalent stereotypes. The prospect of failure understood as obtaining a paradoxical, contradictory, or incomplete interpretation is not encouraging from the point of view of popular critical discourse. Why? Because it undermines the trivialized version of World Literature as a collection of texts that are so diverse that they provide a sense of otherness or exoticism, but at the same time are so familiar, fitting in with our sense of realism and common sense, that they will not pose a major interpretational challenge. Of course, there is a substantial difference between an advertisement put out by a publishing house and critical strategies that do not have to be subordinate to them. Still, I am under the long-lasting impression that there is a certain feedback loop between reviewers and marketing departments that directly affects readers' expectations of literature and criticism.

The peculiar dormancy concerning conventional realism, observed in literary criticism focused on World Literature, is interrupted by a critical practice that picks holes in its own discourse. The consensus between sleepy literary criticism, translation criticism receding into academic positions, and petrified contemporary World Literature, is lethal for what we understand as literary culture. It also concerns the possibility of implementing the idea of World Literature as a cultural project (or maybe even a utopia) based on the dehegemonization of the canon and linguistic variety. The critique of "Anglo-globalism" (Arac 2002) seems to be an imperative starting point for a discussion about the future of World Literature. In this context, one could paraphrase Mallarmé and say: if literature is made of words, World Literature is made of translations.

Languages of World Literature and global monolingualism

Slovenian scholar Marko Juvan points out that the growing importance of the concept of World Literature in contemporary literary research is the result, on the one hand, of progressive globalization, and, on the other hand, of the crisis of late capitalism. He also notes that such literature is created within a framework based on "asymmetrical relation between hegemonic centers and subordinate semi-peripheries and peripheries" (Juvan 2019: 6). It would be pointless to argue with this diagnosis, or with the recognition that the concept of World Literature is fostered by human and cultural migrations – allowing for "transcultural flows of people, capital, goods,

and ideas, and deconstruction of monolingual, ethnically essentialist categories” (Juvan 2019: 8). Rebecca Walkowitz describes this type of text as “born translated” (Walkowitz 2015), i.e. a work not only functioning in the circulation of World Literature, but somehow created with this circulation in mind and with the awareness that the text must relatively easily concede to translation. One of the far-reaching effects of this mechanism is undoubtedly the progressive standardization of contemporary novels designed for the global publishing market – creating a separate literary system as well as becoming the subject of separate studies (Moretti 2000, Beecroft 2015). I have written more extensively on the reasons for this state of affairs and the possibilities of its conceptualization in contemporary discourse elsewhere (Szmidt 2021); therefore in this article I would like to draw attention to an issue directly related to translation issues. Alexander Beecroft summarizes Tim Parks and Stephen Owen’s research and states that

writers working outside the English language are designing their work for ease of translation, excising local content that exceeds the interest level of an audience in translation. (...) audiences in translation being arguably more interested in descriptions of exotic foods and colorful festivals than they are in references to tenth-century poets or contemporary debates on education policy. What emerges, then (and what one can imagine emerging further in the future) is a global literature designed to narrate shared global experiences in a linguistic register freed from slang and ambiguity in order to be translated as seamlessly as possible from one language to another. (...) the increasing globalization of English itself (as well, perhaps, as French), may exert increasing pressures in the future even on English-language writers in Karachi or Kansas City to purify their language, washing their sheets (to borrow a phrase from Manzoni) in the transatlantic. (Beecroft 2015: 281)

Beecroft claims that particularly popular genres and relatively absorptive narrative conventions exploit “local color as a purely decorative element” (Beecroft 2015: 282). The goal of such strategies is to create an illusion of cultural singularity for the envisioned global taste, “while constructing plots that could readily be transferred anywhere in the world” (Beecroft 2015: 282). Stephen Owen compares such a global literary menu to “food courts” in shopping malls, i.e. restaurant sections where we can enjoy cuisines from different parts of the world. The very understanding of “world cuisine” may, however, be questioned, considering that the dishes are adapted to the actual or imagined tastes of local consumers (Owen 2003: 532– 548).

Owen claims there is a cultural transmission camouflage employed in this process, resulting in a flavor modification as well as other consequences in staging the food. Nevertheless, one could equally reasonably argue that some customers of restaurants in malls are aware that even a tasty “oriental” dish is not exactly representative of the preferences and taste of the cuisine rooted thousands of kilometers away. Continuing this polemical metaphor, one could add that not every cook and consumer has a taste that will be shared by the best chefs or, from a different perspective, their grandparents. Not always the same dishes are served halogen-lit in a mall restaurant or at home for loved ones. What’s more, a cuisine transferred to another cultural and economic context – or at least juxtaposed with other cuisines – always undergoes a transformation. It adopts less familiar flavors and presentation, whilst adapting to local consumer relations and forms of preferred packaging. Under the influence of the target place – or even during the process of transatlantic migration – not just our own preferences may change, but also the image of ourselves as chefs: once locals, now immigrants, in the past cooking for a native community, today serve dishes to guests who speak a different language, eat with different cutlery, while watching different shows and reading different literature. From this perspective, the division between the authentic source and artificial target culture is the fruit of cultural essentialism and globalist simplification. Criticism of this form of petrification seems ambiguous or even censorious. Consequently, it results in marginalizing subjects who find gratification, inspiration, or creative freedom in their cultural transfer. It seems to be a judgment akin to combining the categories of authenticity and cultural purity – a one-component culture as the desired outcome, and under no circumstances amenable to economic and social exchange.

Whilst using the analogy of literary “food courts”, I do not deny the real challenge for culture and criticism, which the petrified global novel undoubtedly becomes. Such doubts arise not due to its disciplined alienness, but precisely because of the Freudian *Uncanny* – a peculiar sense of familiarity, all the more acute when our knowledge about a novel’s cultural background is insufficient to provide us with a feeling of being unrestrained. Nonetheless, I am acquainted with many novels which not only tolerate global culture or become its innocent authentic victims, but embrace the advantages presented by these conditions and thematize them. As Richard Lane observes in his introduction to the essay by Suman Gupta: “What globalization has revealed is that this work needs to happen as much “at home”

as “elsewhere”, as much in relation to one’s locality as one’s “globalized” network.” (Lane 2013: 862).

Non-normativity of multilingualism

In the case of writers such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Chigozie Obioma or Gaël Faye, it could be argued that they have gained a global audience¹⁰ (directly or in translation) at least partly due to their exceptionally original works. They each exceed the conventions of both native and target cultures, and at the same time, their novels have proved to be accessible to a global literary audience. Although novels written by the aforementioned authors merit discussion, I would instead like to propose focusing on literary works which problematize their status as transnational novels in a slightly different manner. Of course, novels such as *Americanah* by Adichie and *An Orchestra of Minorities* by Chigozie Obioma, provide more than enough material to reflect on the subjectivity that eludes center-periphery, local-global, real-created oppositions, explored by multiple scholars.¹¹ Nonetheless, instead of a linguistic patchwork and the experience of immigrants, I would like to focus here on authors who explore linguistic non-normativity and the narrative fragmentation that accompanies it – for example Tomer Gardi (2016) and Xiaolu Guo (2008), as well as Sharon Dodua Otoo’s novella *the things i am thinking while smiling politely* (2016), published originally in Germany. In Otoo’s novella, the deconstruction of the language and form of the novel (fragmentary, asynchronous, and non-chronological), is combined with considerations of a socio-political nature, primarily on the everyday experience of racism.

¹⁰ As an aside, I leave here the question of whether by the global literary audience we mean multilingual readers of translations, or – as Chesney seems to assume – English-speaking readers (McColl Chesney 2017: 256).

¹¹ Zob. np. P. Koziel, *Narrative Strategy in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Novel „Americanah”: the Manifestation of Migrant Identity*, “Studies of the Department of African Languages and Cultures”, No 49, 2015, p. 96–113. S.A. McCoy, *The “Outsider Within”: counter-narratives of the “New” African diaspora in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah*, “Journal of the African Literature Association”, No 11:3, 2013, p. 279–294. A. Uka Nwanwanwu, *Transculturalism, Otherness, Exile, and Identity in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s Americanah*, “Matatu”, no 49, 2017, p. 386–399. E. Rodríguez Murphy, *New Transatlantic African Writing: Translation, Transculturation and Diasporic Images in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s The Thing Around Your Neck and Americanah*, “Prague Journal of English Studies”, Volume 6, No. 1, 2017, p. 93–104.

Even though these reflections are complex and engaging, none of these topics becomes the central issue of this unconventional short story, subordinated to an experimental linguistic-narrative pattern. Her language is disturbingly light and humorous, although the main experience described in the novella is the destruction of the narrator's marriage. The author uses newly coined words or lingual compilations emphasizing the sonic dimension of words (i.e. "gobackandaskbossifwehavesoyamilkdammit", Otoo 2016: 57), integrating German vocabulary into a predominantly English text, or distinguishing typographically individual words or phrases. A particularly self-aware, almost ironic decision was to add a "glossary" at the end of the book, in which the author explains what particular objects or characteristically German phrases mean. All these textual decisions create a uniquely executed duality within the novella, which includes a German text within an English-language framework. The narrative is peculiarly detached from the traumatic experience; it is an occasionally light-hearted but deeply troubling narrative where her experience of racial otherness is one of the reasons given for choosing a place to live:

My German reading materials were full of white children called Klaus or Liesl. I honestly thought that I would be the first Black person ever to set foot on German soil – and I loved the idea. One small step for man and all that... I was on my way to Magdeburg! (Otoo 2016: 37)

Similarly, Jahan Ramazani comments on the poetry he analyzes from the perspective of transnational poetics. Discussing Okot p'Bitek's poem, he focuses on the role of local rituals in practices of resistance to European domination and adds:

Even so, the form, structure, and language of his long poem complicate the notion of poetry as local or national resistance to a hegemonic modernity, since *Song of Lawino*, though hardly woolen suited, combines the long Western dramatic monologue in free verse with the repetitions and oral urgency of Acoli songs; its diction intertwines Acoli words and semi-translated proverbs with a robustly Africanized English; and its anti-Western localism is informed, ironically, by Okot's Western anthropological training. (Ramazani 2009: 7–8)

The linguistic collage of the poem does not have one source – the literary creation reflects both the process of colonization as well as the resistance to colonization. The individual creativity of the author engages with both of these linguistic dimensions. He does not so much reflect on the state of language, but rather plays with its liminality in the poem. In Otoo's prose,

however, language is not used in experimental narrative form in an obvious way. She often suspends the meaning between what is said and what can be inferred. In both of these cases, translation is not simply a challenge but rather a dilemma. How is it possible to translate a text whose linguistic deconstruction is built on the intensive experience of the linguistic distinctiveness of the immigrant or colonized? Despite the similarity in the literary deconstruction of language undertaken by the writers discussed here, this dilemma cannot be reduced to conventions of hypothetical (Otoo, Gardi) or executed (Guo) translations, but rather reveals the status of the target language. In the case of the Polish language, which cannot be described as a global one, it would be a complex task for any translator to fashion it as a dominant world language that the narrator or character resists. One might also ask: what principles does a translator follow in the process of creating a linguistic sense of separateness and colonization if they occupy the privileged position of a native speaker? Although the term “native” remains in use to this day, it might nevertheless be described as in a sense conditional and not necessarily justifiably juxtaposed with “not your language” (Walkowitz 2015: 163–202). A translation of Witold Gombrowicz’s *Trans-Atlantyka* offers a similar challenge. Jerzy Jarniewicz comments on an English version of the text, stating that it is created by an “eclectic diction” resulting from stylistically creative rather than “solemn” translation (Jarniewicz 2012: 137). In this sense, it could be argued that the abovementioned works (especially the cases of Gardi and Guo) become experimental translation criticism within the form of a novel. Both authors fictionalize reflections on the translation of a literary text in a similar way to Thomas Mann’s use of philosophical discourse in his novel *The Magic Mountain*.

The only answer to this linguistic and translatory dilemma, however, cannot be the one rebelliously suggested by Michał Kłobukowski, a translator, who made the following pronouncement regarding the translation of names and other terms in prose: “The logical conclusion of the process of abandoning Polish translation [of the names] should be an abandonment of translation altogether” (Kłobukowski, Zaleska 2015: 81). Taking a different point of view, Małgorzata Łukasiewicz claims that we often encounter a kind of translation mystery:

It’s a little as though the translation is an embarrassing fact that is better kept a secret, right? As if the fact that books written in one language are translated

into another is not something interesting and worth considering (Łukasiewicz, Zaleska 2015: 165).

This reflection could be considered well beyond the sphere of translation criticism and applied to individual novels of contemporary World Literature. Such linguistic falsification would not only conceal the very fact of the translation, but also mask the linguistic diversity and distinctiveness of the prose. It is not a specific translation pact that we accept as readers of translations (i.e. the Japanese characters speak Finnish in a translated novel), but rather the banal annulment of the linguistic image of the world.

Another possibility, still rarely implemented in most countries, concerns the local edition of a given work in its original language. For example, Otoo's book was published in English by a German publishing house. The bilingual edition of *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* by Xiaolu Guo (Guo 2008) would, in my opinion, be even more relevant for non-native English speakers than a monolingual translation (Guo 2009), considering the novel's exploration of the non-nativity of the protagonist's language.¹² The same publishing strategy would be equally beneficial for

¹² It was only at the end of the preparation of this translation that I came across a monograph chapter entitled *Translation as a Motor of Critique and Invention in Contemporary Literature: The Case of Xiaolu Guo* by Fiona Doloughan, which focuses on the topics of multilingualism, criticism and translation in Xiaolu Guo's literature. She recognizes the author's perspective on translation as a creative force of her prose, transgressing different dimensions of literary text. She states, slightly differently to my own perspective, that the novel "draws attention to the fact that it is the monolingual, rather than the bilingual or multilingual individual, who is disadvantaged or at a loss in today's world where an ability to speak or write more than one language is the norm" (Doloughan 2018: 160). However, I would argue that the linguistic norm mentioned by the author does not apply to everyone equally and is celebrated unequally. The narrator of Guo's novel, similar to most immigrants and people from non-Western cultures, is expected to know at least two languages. This ability, however, is not necessarily met with any particular admiration. Knowledge of foreign languages by native speakers of English has a completely different status, often being considered a kind of worldliness and an expression of cultural awareness and openness. In Guo's novel, the protagonist's loneliness is partly due to the fact that her presence is constantly questioned, and her imperfect English is treated as – sometimes pejoratively, sometimes indifferently – an obvious deficiency of an immigrant, restricting communication and limiting to an extent human connection. Partly, however, it results from the unequal multilingualism; the protagonist's fluency in her native language is unhelpful and distant, while the difficulties with the English language are close, almost affecting her body. Although I have no prospect of developing a wider comment or a discussion with Doloughan's observations and interpretation in this short footnote, I wanted to add this acknowledgement and highlight the value of this approach and the in-depth interpretation.

the hypothetical translations of Gardi's novel.¹³ This editorial and translation practice seems much more popular in the case of poetry, where the practical issues of publication are less restricting. Simultaneously, other literary genres' linguistic gravity should probably be taken into consideration as well. Deconstructing language with so profoundly a non-transparent status as in the cases discussed above demands decisions contrary to the one outlined by Łukasiewicz as an embarrassment of translation. It would involve not only the overt disclosure of the translation, but also the encouragement for readers to reflect on the differences and distinct statuses of the source and target languages. In the context of literature exploring different language experiences and struggles, such reflections could engender a worthwhile experience for the reader – fostering transcultural empathy in a way that is uncommon elsewhere.

World Literature and the crisis of literary multilingualism

As well as the experimental prose discussed above, the World Literature “food court” proposes strikingly dissimilar menus. A feeling of the *Uncanny* accompanies me frequently when I read best-selling prose published by the largest Polish publishing houses. In the following paragraphs I will refer mainly to two examples, even though the issues discussed here might be easily applied to a wider collection of novels, predominantly English-language. The first is the infamous *American Dirt* by Jeanine Cummins (2020) and the second, *Disappearing Earth* by Julia Phillips (2019). The second has not been condemned, but rather almost unequivocally praised. This is all the more surprising given the fact that the author uses a very similar type of narrative and linguistic manipulation. It may be astonishing that both books are considered international bestsellers, even though they reveal the generic representation of cultures and societies that the authors know either in a visibly mediatized or superficial way. Yet even despite these shortcomings, both cases are hardly glaring examples of the petrification of World Literature (here we could point to, for example, David Roberts's

¹³ During a meeting with Tomer Gardi, which took place on May 14, 2018 in Krakow's cafe Cheder, Paweł Zarychta presented a few pages of the translation of the novel. Interestingly, he provided it with the annotation “Translation in an adequate version preserving the character of the original”. Dilemmas regarding the translation of this work into Polish (and translation in general) were also discussed during a Q&A with the audience.

worldwide bestseller *Shantaram*, or *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything Across Italy, India and Indonesia* by Elizabeth Gilbert). It seems that in such cases literary criticism and translation criticism have an important role to play – somewhat different than in the case of poetry translations, but equally difficult.

In both cases, language is not just a facade behind which more serious problems are hidden. The issues of cultural representation, the exploitation of experience neglected in public discourse, or cultural appropriation, are rooted in the linguistic creation of these bestsellers. Both authors efficiently transfer a non-English-speaking experience into the dominant pattern of global novel. *American Dirt* (to which I will devote a little more attention)¹⁴ uses this strategy more shamelessly, thus causing a backlash, while *Disappearing Earth* offers similar manipulation but in a more subtle way. Such cases could be an argument in favor of criticism as formulated by Beecroft and Owen. A simplified narrative scheme referring to the average taste of the recipients of pompous Hollywood productions and genre bestsellers is in both cases intertwined with places and experiences that provide a sense of radical differentness – Kamchatka and Mexico serve as peculiar discourse markers, triggering a game of empathy towards the aggrieved others. It is no coincidence that in both cases, the main characters are women and children – this not only creates the illusion that we are dealing with non-dominant stories (although told from a hegemonic center), but also allows for empathy on a sentimental note. Being moved by the suffering of others, however, does not lead to the feeling of real empathy and, consequently, does not abolish the distance between the characters and the reader. Therefore, it does not shift power dynamics, nor does it question the American citizen's privileged position of giving or refusing shelter.

Why is such a narrative, for a reader who has never made the difficult crossing with a child from Mexico to the United States, after their entire family was murdered in front of them, a significant challenge? Why does it not reveal in any way a different vision of the world and interpersonal and family relations other than mainstream melodramas? Is therefore a literary masterpiece (a publishers' bidding war would suggest that) a book which

¹⁴ I published a review and a critical essay about both books. For this reason I do not want to repeat the opinions and analyses expressed there. In this article, therefore, I limit myself to functional comments on the topic in question, and I do not express all reflections or full interpretation of the novels and their translations.

enables empathy with the traumatic experience of the protagonist? Is it not bizarre that empathy comes so easily to us? Lifeless Spanish language (often resembling robotic oddness) is abundantly used in the novel. It does not, however, create space for the linguistic distinctiveness of the experience. Both the characters' creation and the narrative frame respond primarily to the habits of the readers, accustomed to Hollywood tearjerkers in which systemic (economic, political, social) injustice and suffering are resolved by privatized, individual success. I am not sure, therefore, that this inspiration is necessarily derived from immigrant literature or Mexican novels. This peculiar form of intertextuality, or even trans-textuality, does not signal, however, a modernist project à la Georges Perec. Such novels are created not so much in awe of the multilingualism and inventiveness of global literature, but rather in the spirit of appreciation of the author's dominant position on this global scale ("Anglo-globalism" would be a recurring term here; Arac 2002). Multilingual incrustation does not undermine this hierarchy, but paradoxically strengthens it. At the end of the novel, an undisputed vision of the American dream awaits the protagonists. The novel seems untouched in any way by critical narratives about the condition of the country's immigrants and underprivileged citizens; rather, it creates a sterile, separate, perfectly decipherable opposition between American paradise and Mexican hell. This vision seems all the more ambiguous since it is depicted by an American writer writing predominantly for an American reader (Oprah's appreciation of this book sanctioned the kind of interest and emotions that this novel was designed to arouse; Haber 2020). The image of the Mexican family ultimately crossing the border confirms the well-established, binary image of both cultures, which does not pose a challenge to interpretation on any reading level.

Stories of this kind are a relatively easy task for a translator¹⁵ – they require little interpretative competence, since the normativity of the texts borders on the generic. More interesting from literary and critical translation perspectives (even if the text itself is not valued as high-brow literature) are the textual and linguistic decisions meant to authenticate the experience presented in a particular schematic way. This arises not so much from the author's inventiveness in new forms of multilingualism that skilled critics

¹⁵ It is worth mentioning that the translation of *American Dirt* was published in Polish almost immediately, as was the case with Julia Philips's book. The difference in quality between them, however, is fundamental, with a distinct superiority in the case of the novel by Philips, translated by Jolanta Kozak. In the case of Cummins's book, the translation additionally emphasizes and multiplies its problematic narrative and language.

might be able to decipher, but because criticism has all the tools necessary to recognize the linguistic and narrative mechanisms of staging the effect of authenticity, the ambiguous status of the novel's multilingualism as well as the use of "foreign" quotes or cultural exploitation. It is equally important to recognize the reasons why narratives constructed in this way become "celebrated" literature within the confines of late capitalism.

The opportunity of transferring narrative patterns to any language or corner of the world (or the idea that such a thing might be possible), seems to be a variant of cultural neocolonialism, all the more puzzling as it is wrapped in the idea of literary diversity. An interesting proposal to rebuild and problematize the concept of World Literature was proposed by Marko Juvan in his recently published book, *Worlding a Peripheral Literature* (2019). This model has its origin on the one hand in the Goethean *Weltliteratur*, and on the other hand in various contemporary theories that perceive World Literature not so much as a collection of national literatures, but rather as a separate literary system in itself. It would be a mistake to conclude that only Goethe's legacy and the hitherto dominant cultural hierarchy are conducive to maintaining the hegemonic system in World Literature. Although monocausalist arguments are not recommended when discussing complex, global and dynamic cultural processes, it seems that identifying and considering the origins of the crisis within World Literature may allow a slow rebuilding of this unexpectedly stable field.

This crisis has prompted many theorists and researchers of World Literature to suspend current practice and recognize that the World Literature project has not only failed, but is not worthy of further defense. I am not sure that the gesture of rejecting this global literary utopia should come from those who could be characterized as dominant or even in charge of this field. I would be more interested in the development of this concept from the perspective of researchers and writers, who thus obtained a framework for their work and who otherwise would find themselves placed within a somewhat narrow framework of sub-disciplines and numerous "foreign" languages, i.e. languages that are poorly represented or completely absent from the global canon. An interesting case is Marko Juvan's monograph on France Prešeren, mentioned above. The author deconstructs not only the principles of World Literature, but also the position of the subject himself – the one introducing the Slovenian romantic poet into the world canon. Juvan declares:

While preparing this book, I had to struggle with doubts that my colleagues in world literature studies that focus either on the canonized West or the postcolonial rest most probably do not know. I felt a constant pressure to convince an international reader why my peripheral perspective on the worlding of a peripheral Romantic poet from East-Central Europe matters (Juvan 2019: 29–30).

The author's apprehension about the irrelevance of his project, which does not reassure the cultural hegemon and which does not discuss the most marginalized subjects in the field of World Literature, may lead to the questioning of World Literature as a kind of pre-set game. While "the colonized subaltern subject[s]" (Spivak 1988) and other unprivileged subjects in terms of "Anglo-globalism" question their own relevance to the World Literature project and problematize their position, the system of domination remains stable and unchanged.

Dilemmas of the untranslatability of World Literature

A struggle for the attention and recognition of an unspecified global audience may be doomed to failure. However, I am not convinced that Emily Apter is right when she states that one of the founding errors of World Literature concerns an assumption about the translatability of literature:

However, I do harbor serious reservations about tendencies in World Literature toward reflexive endorsement of cultural equivalence and substitutability or toward the celebration of nationally and ethnically branded "differences" that have been niche-marketed as commercialized "identities" (Apter 2013: 11).

Simultaneously, the author notes that an important step towards protecting World Literature from itself would necessitate the greater involvement of comparative translation studies, "that recognizes the importance of non-translation, mistranslation, incomparability and untranslatability" (Apter 2013: 13). The failure of translation as the central problem of World Literature seems to be a tempting prospect; it undermines the most important rule governing its idea (translatability), but above all makes translation a condition for its further development. Nonetheless, the erroneous thesis concerning the linguistic equivalence of a literary text omits a fundamental dilemma which David Damrosch has repeatedly attempted to resolve, i.e. suggesting that a wider knowledge of foreign languages may be a partial solution (Damrosch 2011: 458–461). It would be hard to disagree that such

proficiency (even to a varying degree, as suggested by Damrosch) positively influences the position of both the interpreter and critic. However, I think that this is a solution with a mere decorative value, and the problem posed in this way is at best a substitute topic.

The concept of World Literature rightfully assumes that we will not be able to learn all the languages of literature. Our proficiency would have to be that of a translator (or close to it) for it to be noticeable in this field and to provide a significant critical perspective. As Jerzy Jarniewicz argues, this perspective has far-reaching consequences – not only for literature in a global perspective or for the well-researched issue of the influence of the language of translation on the literature of the target language, but also for our vision of the world:

The defense of translation as an important cultural institution is the defense of a society open to seeking and creating meanings, to the readiness to change the existing cognitive and axiological optics, to participation as a principle of democracy. It is the translators who, if you listen to their work, most clearly remind you that each of the professed truths (just like any translation that is the truth of the text) remains incomplete (Jarniewicz 2018: 146).

A similar incompleteness (or perhaps a semblance of completeness) occurs in the context of the foreign language learning project proposed by Damrosch. In view of this dilemma, I would argue an opposing view – learning foreign languages should not be a prerequisite for a reflection on World Literature, unless it concerns a specific literary field and research, or, in particular, translation criticism. The paradoxical realization of the utopia of World Literature is based on the fact that no one attains the position of a linguistic hegemon – that mostly we all read translations. Translation into English is perhaps the most influential, but it still remains a translation, not the translation. By favoring literature read in the original, we paradoxically strengthen the hegemon. It cannot be denied that the original language we can read is, apart from the mother tongue, most often English. Thus, “Anglo-globalism” becomes a game of two forces – the native language and the language of the hegemon. Such a hierarchy seems to contradict World Literature. In its present shape, the utopia of World Literature is not so much disappearing as it is camouflaged by the appearance of multiplicity.

Conclusion

By accepting the challenge of World Literature as a serious concept, we agree that the prominence of translation does not lay in its invisibility. In the same spirit, the commonplace conviction that the best critical text is, in fact, a tautology, should be met with suspicion. All these observations do not inevitably lead to a strong preference for cultural absolutism and essentialism, according to which cultural exchange, transfer, and migration's imprint on the subject or on literature should be sidestepped. It seems that this, somehow dated, ideal not only limits creativity and the multiplicity of viewpoints, but simply does not correspond to cultural contemporaneity. One might therefore dismiss the catastrophic tone that dominates Apter's essay collection and admit the possibility of its reversal. Discussing the paradoxes of translation, Jarniewicz notes:

I am not saying that literature is untranslatable, yet it is translated. It is already too obvious. In this book, I will say something else: literature is untranslatable, and therefore it is translated. Moreover, untranslatability justifies the creativity of translation. And since translation does not exist without creativity, untranslatability justifies translation as such (Jarniewicz 2018: 9).

Translation criticism is unavoidable and yet at the same time is one of the most neglected branches of World Literature, overlooked by a large group of theoreticians and dismissed as a task only for specialists in the field of translation studies. What is perhaps the most prevalent belief, influencing the whole World Literature landscape and the superstitions still present in literary research, is translation viewed as a prosthesis of reading literature in the original language version. Defining the global literary audience as readers of predominantly translated literature might seem risky, especially if we agree that the translation mystery and the reduction of reflection on the language of literature is an accurate diagnosis. This seems to me the major problem: the reduction of interpretations to summaries, collections of tropes and themes replacing unpredictability and criticism, the endless arrangement of canons in place of a reflection on the presupposition that interpretation based on the original language versions remains unparalleled. Nevertheless, the disclosure of the fact of translation and the definition of World Literature as literature primarily in translation makes it possible to expect a more substantial involvement of translation and literary criticism,

between those who recognize language as a problematic and problematizing aspect of our being “at home” and “elsewhere” (Lane 2013: 862), those who realize that “feelings” or “impressions” (Mendelsohn 2012) are also grounded in translations, and, last but not least, those who challenge both translators and readers of translations, instead of being sucked down into the quicksand of World Literature.

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