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Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature: From Antiquity to the Present Day*, Verso Books, 2015, 312 pp., \$29.95 US (pbk), ISBN 9781781685730.

Alexander Beecroft's most recent study, *An Ecology of World Literature*, is a profound undertaking that uses the scientific framework of ecology to "facilitate the comparative study of the interactions between literatures and their environments" (28), and hopefully to provoke discussions about particular cultural contexts with specific ecologies. Beecroft's intellectual interests grew out of his desire to say something useful about literatures (in his case ancient Greece and early China) in conjunction with each other that did not depend on claims of contact, leading to his acclaimed study *Authorship and Cultural Identity in Early Greece and China*.¹ Furthermore, the critical discourses on world literature, as productive as they are, left Beecroft searching for a theoretical model that could make sense of, for instance, the relationship between political fragmentation and cultural unity found in early Greece and China, and that furthermore did not use as a premise the value we, as modern readers, add to the texts we read (2).² In addition to these questions, Beecroft was introduced to the work of the Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock. The confluence of these elements led him to consider that the models for understanding how literature circulates were actually a series of different concrete answers, emerging in specific contexts, to the same set of problems about the interactions between literatures and their environments (3). Drawing from the work of literary and linguistic scholars and modeled on the science of ecology, Beecroft developed a scheme of six ecologies for his interaction: the epichoric (or local), panchoric (a generic term he derived from Panhellenic), cosmopolitan, vernacular, national and global, that offer a conducive framework for comparative studies not bound by time, geography or language.

It is worth spending a little bit of time to understand why the science of ecology is such a useful framework. Working off a synergy with Bourdieu's sociology of cultural productions and other work related to cultural or civilizational capital, that is the literary economy itself

¹ Alexander Beecroft, *Authorship and Cultural Identity in Early Greece and China* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

² Beecroft mentions notably David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?*, illustrated edition (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003); Franco Moretti, "Conjectures on World Literature," *New Left Review* 1, 2000: 54-68; and Pascale Casanova, *La republique mondiale des lettres* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1999).

and as it relates to the “economic economy,” Beecroft asserts that ecology, as opposed to economics, is more comfortable accepting that the complexity may be inherent to the system. Ecologists, he explains, examine the interactions between different forms of life that exist in a particular region, as well as the interactions of those living things with their non-living environment. Particularly useful as a metaphor ecology “understands, accepts, and insists on, the distinct and mutually interactive nature of these various inputs, so that changes in the external environment (more or less rain than usual, for example) can have complex and shifting impacts on the various species found in a given context” (18). Literature itself is a system, and must be understood as being in an ecological relation to other phenomena, as well as other languages and literatures with which it is in contact. Beecroft shows us that literature thrives under a wide variety of ways, and thriving is a consequence of adaptability to new conditions and/or environments. Beecroft is careful to distance this work from ecocriticism, and likens it more to linguistic ecology and media ecology, which likewise examine the relationships between their objects of study and their (human) environments (21). Taking the analogy one step further Beecroft identifies literary biomes (a notion he discusses in detail) rather than literary systems, as productive sites to think about how literature circulates, what sorts of constraints operate on that circulation, and how particular literary communities respond to those constraints.

The journey through the six ecologies Beecroft lays out is altogether fascinating and staggering in breadth and depth. I will not provide a detailed description of each of the ecologies, but rather offer some observations in general, and hope to relate some of the issues Beecroft raises to the field of Arabic literary studies in particular, especially for those who work comparatively. What must be kept in mind is that the literatures Beecroft addresses are written ones. Although the epichoric (for example) may refer to cultures who excelled at and are known for circulating verbal arts orally, it is the literature, i.e. texts that grows out of them that interest him and play an effective role in the construction of ecologies.

When thinking about these ecologies we must avoid the tendency for chronologies or teleology; they are not necessarily generative. The literary ecologies are “mental isolates,” i.e. intellectual constructions designed to make scientific study possible. To complicate matters more, at least two of them suggest merely hypothetical possibilities (epichoric and global) that may have existed or may exist under certain conditions. Literary ecologies are primarily about how texts are consumed, not produced, and depending on the audience may exist in more than one ecology (60). That Beecroft’s ecologies “cut across traditional cultural boundaries and juxtapose unrelated cultures in deliberately artificial ways might be helpful as an antidote to civilizational thinking, which all too often forgets that civilizations are always, in the end, mental isolates as well, and that human cultural experience knows no firm or enduring borders” (28).

To no surprise, language is the key element to all these environments, whether cosmopolitan or vernacular, a minor or a dialect, any expression can and will be understood by select audiences depending on language. Notably for scholars of the Arabic literary tradition Beecroft’s typology identifies Arabic as the one cosmopolitan language still in use as a unified written language over a large number of regional, national and other identifications. At the same time, it puts the cosmopolitanism of Arabic in dialogue with other ecologies, transcending time and geography, offering correctives to the existing scholarship. While it is no longer (and has not been for some time) acceptable to use the term “decadence” or *inhiṭāf* for the period between the end of the Classical and the *nabḍa*,

thinking about the literary environments and issues such as linguistic competition, patronage, translation and transmission, may move us away from colonial models or literary history chronologies to ones that reflect (linguistic) complexity and multiplicity and that compete for viability under different sets of circumstances. As well, the same can be said, for example, for the period of translation initiated by Rifā‘at Rāfi‘ al-Ṭaḥṭawī’s school in 1835 that was instrumental in transferring an array of new discourses into Arabic, most notably the European concept of nation, but also literary genres.

One may wonder for how long Arabic will persist in this cosmopolitan status, not only as minority languages gain recognition nationally, such as Tamazigh in Morocco, and other languages other than Arabic in Libya, but, also as geographies shift. I am thinking about the status of Kurdish in the nations of Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq—from being banned outright to the potential of becoming a national language in previously Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan (the only construct seemingly feasible to me at this time). In the first issue of the new Syrian Writers Association journal *Annāq*, a large portion of the publication is devoted to poetry written in Arabic by Kurdish Syrians. An introductory essay to the section describes the entanglement of Kurdish poets with Arabic over the past fifty years; underneath each line, the poet breathes Kurdish. Many of these poets constitute well-known figures in the pantheon of Arabic literature. When the consequences of writing in Kurdish are no longer so grave, will poets chose their vernacular over the cosmopolitan? And how will language affect the kinds of poetry they compose as it begins to circulate in Kurdish both orally and in print?

Writing in a vernacular is always a choice, an aesthetic with the potential for political returns, and while it may narrow the audience, it constructs a cultural community. Vernacular literatures often compete with cosmopolitan ones, and to promote themselves they usually issue a manifesto—Dante’s *De vulgari eloquentia* being one of the most well-known to a European audience (159-170). They may also compose works of literature designed to emulate works in the cosmopolitan tradition. The vernacular ecology may then acquire the necessary elements of a national one.

As I read *An Ecology of World Literature*—and as I tried to keep in mind the mission to “cut across traditional cultural boundaries and juxtapose unrelated cultures”—I could not stop the flow of various texts, sites, “moments,” and figures from the Arabic tradition entering in and out of my mind: the Abbasid period and beyond, when many littérateurs wrote in both Persian and Arabic; the transmission of *Kaḥḥla wa Dimna*; the multiple redactions of *The 1001 Nights*; Umayyad Spain; figures like Ibn Rumi; Ottoman Turkish; Algerian writers Rashid Boudjedra and Assia Djebar (to name two); Bedouin poetry of Yemen, the Sinai, and Jordan recorded and translated by scholars; Israeli Jews writing in Arabic; the legitimization/legalization of minority languages; and more. We provide the thick descriptions of the literary languages that emerge and the conditions that bring them about, offering supportive grounds for comparative studies that *An Ecology of World Literature* advances. The framework pushes past a center-periphery model to suggest other kinds of relationships between regions based on how languages produce certain kinds of literatures and the conditions that enable their production, and this may help to unravel and identify the varying ecologies within the larger framework of the Arabic cosmopolitan, for example.

Beecroft’s global literary system (Chapter 6) discusses a hypothetical future because it lacks a body of texts ready for examination, entailing a conceptual and methodological shift, although he does suggest a particular narrative strategy (plot of globalization) of an emergent global literary ecology (243). Here he employs terminology directly from ecology studies, the most relevant being MVP (minimum viable population) when discussing the viability of

languages and literary languages and how texts enter the global literary system. Translation is instrumental in this process, of course, but also leads to more questions: What does get translated? From what language and to which one? How do these translations then influence the literary language of the target language? It is well-known that more texts are translated from European languages (even minor ones) than major non-European languages. Access to the global literary system is not equal, and although a larger language is more likely to sustain a vital literary tradition than a smaller one, there are real disparities between the strengths of particular languages and the literatures of them (246). Beecroft outlines a number of variables that affect this movement: linguistic dispersion; literacy rates; publishing and book distribution systems; censorship; and competing literary languages within the same population. Moreover, to fully understand this system, we need much more data about these elements. His prediction for this ecology is rather grim in terms of diversity, and he discusses the work of Tim Parks and Stephen Owen to identify some anxieties about the adaptation of literature in national languages to a global marketplace (279-281). What emerges, and may emerge in the future then,

[Is] a global literature designed to narrate shared global experiences in a linguistic register freed from slang and ambiguity in order to be translated seamlessly as possible from one language to another. Only those literatures large enough to generate sufficient economies of scale to generate profits in the original language (and only English, perhaps, can be entirely certain of this status) will be able to maintain literary ecologies that nurture rich, complex works, deeply engaged with local circumstances and/or with local literary pasts, as well as with the contemporary and the universal. (281)

From here, Beecroft concludes by imaging two different futures (based on existing evidence): one that basically promotes homogeneity in which English is central and dominant and smaller languages become more and more extinct. The alternative—heterogeneity—suggests a model where the number of literary languages increase thanks to the development of new transnational literary languages in Africa and to the promotion of regional languages for literary purposes around the world (296). Translation plays a very big role in making sure that the model of heterogeneity prevails (especially of non-European, periphery, minority ones), but in addition to this, Beecroft makes a critical observation based on his ecologies. As much as English as a second language is sweeping the world, when it comes to “bed-time reading,” few second-language learners choose to read other than their native language for pleasure. Cosmopolitan languages thrive best in contexts in which they had no vernacular rivals (299). The choices come down to what a reader/the audience desires: locality (and the richness involved in re-creating it) or global-ity (where particularity is often sacrificed for relatability).

To assure heterogeneity, we as scholars, teachers, researchers, and translators play a vital role to help educate and develop a reading public who can thrive in this kind of “global” environment—one where they may not be or feel at home, but rather are comfortable feeling uncomfortable as they navigate variegated environments and linguistic registers that speak from and about their locales.

An Ecology of World Literature is a fascinating and resourceful study that provides effective models and insights to encourage a re-examination and re-thinking of the conditions that produce the literatures we study. It offers a vision that allows for complexity and that places

language and audience at the center of the discourse, making it possible to map the entanglements that nourish literary environments.

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