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World Literature on *Facebook*

WAI CHEE DIMOCK

THESE DAYS, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO LOOK AT THE NEWS WITHOUT FINDING *FACEBOOK* IN ONE HEADLINE OR ANOTHER. MANY ARE PROMPTED by the leaking of personal information. But a few critics have also called attention to a different kind of problem, having less to do with privacy than with the nature of *Facebook* as a social medium. Writing in the *New York Review of Books*, Charles Petersen makes much of its genesis in an Ivy League dorm room: "While Microsoft could as easily have originated at MIT or Caltech, it was no accident that Facebook came from Harvard." He goes on to analyze the ethos of the site as the digital equivalent of the preppie look: well scrubbed and well behaved, prankish on occasion but in the end clean and safe and bland. The site's juvenile "principle of *in loco parentis*" has given way to the "authoritarian building codes" of the suburbs, with more legroom perhaps but no less supervised and no less homogeneous, a "chilling and puritanical atmosphere" (9–10).

The *New York Review of Books* is not alone in seeing *Facebook* as a symptom, a sign of the emptying out of the nation's public as well as private life. The *Chronicle of Higher Education*, weighing in earlier, already arrived at a similar verdict. In "Faux Friendship" (a title that certainly doesn't mince words), William Deresiewicz says that *Facebook* is a social blight, an "anti-madeleine, an eraser of memory." Its rigid format edits out anything that cannot be displayed in that way, reducing our social and emotional bonds to inane exclamations, countable exhibits, "the size of a wall post." "If we have 768 'friends,' in what sense do we have any?" The visual tally gives the illusion of emotional closeness, but the "friends" here are really "little dehydrated packets of images and information, no more my friends than a set of baseball cards is the New York Mets."

Like baseball cards and the New York Mets, *Facebook* is imagined here as an All-American phenomenon, a thing of darkness that is ours. The vacuousness that we witness on its pages is of a piece with the vacuousness that prevails elsewhere in the United States. There is almost no recognition in these critiques that *Facebook* is no longer the

WAI CHEE DIMOCK, William Lampson Professor of English and American Studies at Yale University, is author of *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton UP, 2006); a coeditor, with Lawrence Buell, of *Shades of the Planet: American Literature as World Literature* (Princeton UP, 2007); and a co-coordinator, with Bruce Robbins, of a special issue of *PMLA*, *Remapping Genre* (122.5 [2007]). She is at work on two critical studies, "The Long Nineteenth Century: Genres, Media, Webs" and "Many Islams: American Literature and the Diversities of a Lived Religion." She is also finishing work on an anthology, "American Literature in the World," with a companion Web site, www.amlitintheworld.org.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.3.730 Published online by Cambridge University Press

monopoly of any one nation and therefore not a symptom of any one nation's malady: its geography and constituencies are much broader. According to company statistics, about seventy percent of its users are outside the United States ("Press Room"). It has corporate headquarters in Dublin and Seoul as well as Palo Alto. And, while English is without question its dominant language, *Facebook* has also gone native whenever there is a need, embracing all the major Asian, African, and European languages, as well as an impressive number of dialects. Currently it is available in Afrikaans, Azeri, Basque, Bengali, Bosnian, Bulgarian, Catalan, Croatian, Estonian, Faroese, Galician, Georgian, Hungarian, Latvian, Lithuanian, Macedonian, Malayalam as well as Malay, Nepali, Bokmål Norwegian as well as Nynorsk Norwegian, Punjabi, Serbian, Slovak, Slovene, Swahili, Tamil, Telugu, Ukrainian, and Welsh, among many others. This ground-level integration into vernacular life means that its political usefulness is not going to be lost on anyone, as the recent events in the Middle East have made abundantly clear. In Syria, Iran, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Uzbekistan, and Vietnam, *Facebook* is intermittently blocked. In China the Tibetan independence movement allegedly operates through *Facebook*; the site was banned during the 2009 Irumqi riot. Even now, *Facebook* can be accessed in China only by those with enough techno-savvy to go through proxy services such as *SecuriTales*.

How do we reconcile these high-risk players—these grassroots organizations and their robust public lives—with their quietist counterpart in the United States? Clearly, *Facebook* is not one. Its membership and capabilities change from one environment to another, so much so that it probably makes more sense to speak of it as a spectrum of variants rather than a single entity. It is adaptable, opportunistic, user-friendly and user-generated, not only globally dispersed but also locally mediated, behaving differently from place to place. What looks like faux friendship in the United States might look like political instrumentality elsewhere in the world. Is there any chance that the future of *Facebook* could be shaped by these variants around the world? And is there any chance that in the United States itself *Facebook* might diversify in the same way, becoming less uniform, less predictable, picking up one "dialect" or another and being inflected, being localized, by these host environments? Will its rigid format prevail, or will its ease of access cut into the rigidity, making it more of an improvisation, built on-site and built from scratch, its ingredients still in the process of being assembled?

We have a chance to test these possibilities in a *Facebook* group that David Palumbo-Liu and I more or less stumbled into. In late November 2009, partly to complement a WGBH series called *Invitation to World Literature*, we decided to set up a forum for a broader debate. Since then, the group has grown to be quite large—over nine hundred members. So it does look like a significant new development at this point. The group is "closed," not searchable through *Google* or other search engines; its size is due largely to the cascading effect of *Facebook*: every time this group shows up on someone's "wall," two others are likely to join. Social networking is the operating baseline here. Even given the low-tech requirements of this group, that baseline turns out to be remarkably flexible, able to support many other applications. The discussion board is a case in point. Allowing several threads of conversation to proceed simultaneously and making each viewer scroll through the entire thread before arriving at the most recent entry, it seems designed to promote an unhurried set of exchanges and to give equal weight to each. Meanwhile, the world literature that unfolds with its help not only echoes the global reach of *Facebook* but also challenges the site to do on its home turf what it has done elsewhere. Would it be able to adapt, expanding its functions in response to on-the-ground demands? Would it be able to enter into the spirit of this

https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.3.730 Published online by Cambridge University Press

particular debate and become a "vernacular" variant in the process?

The vernacular we have in mind is the specialized language of the American academy. Some would call it *jargon*, but *vernacular* seems a more fitting description, since the language in question is that of a subgroup, with conventions more or less naturalized, something like the dialect of the tribe. And there is indeed something tribal about the initial composition of this *Facebook* group—many of the early members came from Stanford and Yale. From that insular beginning, however, the group has expanded to include members from over a hundred institutions—public as well as private, liberal arts colleges, community colleges, research universities, and several high schools—a sizable contingent of whom come from the Middle East, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Turkey, Nigeria, Brazil, Mexico, Romania, Hungary, Russia, Ukraine, the Philippines, Australia, Sweden, and Denmark, as well as France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Italy, and the United Kingdom. Given this diversity of membership and the geographic magnitudes that open up, the group is now less an in-bred tribe than its vexed counterpart: an Internet ephemeral, with no home base and no fixed borders, euphemistically called a "community at a distance." Such a "community" is literally sprung from thin air. It has no antecedents, no institutional home, and, for most of its members, no face-to-face meetings. It is a nonentity in one sense, not much of a group, but perhaps free as a result from the burden of an entrenched structure, from being too well ordered, well maintained.

There are a number of consequences. First and most obvious, because of the lack of institutional context, the hierarchies in place in such a context are more or less suspended. There is indeed a certain flatness to the string of postings, not thickened by familiar associations, but they put everyone more or less on the same footing. Participants can delete what they have posted, but so far no one has done so. Unless this changes, every discussion thread, in its entirety, will always be there, always on record. The digital memory here is coextensive with the postings themselves, an archiving mechanism hospitable to all. Unlike remarks in committee meetings or in face-to-face conversations, where much of what is said is immediately lost, these comments have a chance of being eventually noticed and picked up, allowing for elaboration and cross-references. Each point can be revisited later, framed by new circumstances, new developments that put the debate in a new light. No case is closed; no verdict has the seal of finality.

Facebook, in this way, has made even-handed archiving a kind of structural backup to its open access. It is mechanical, procedural, incapable of distinguishing between kinds of input. This blind impartiality could be irritating from one point of view. Nevertheless, special connections, intellectual or perhaps even emotional, are not out of the question. But they would be works in progress, things that might or might not happen. Depending on the degree of commitment, the thought and care put into the postings, participants can end up having either a fleeting relation to one another or a lasting one, but there is no telling which will occur. This chronic uncertainty can be unsettling, but it does make for a playing field that is less structurally weighted, less burdened by prehistories. To be suspended in cyberspace is both to breathe a thinner air and to carry less freight. This can have an oddly subtractive effect on the group, undoing even some known features of those who are not strangers.

Graduate students become newly unknown quanta in just this way, suddenly appearing less recognizable, less defined, than they have a chance to be inside the classroom or under the rubric of the graduate program. They may prove to be authorities on subjects that their professors are only dimly aware of.

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One of the liveliest discussions has been on comics and graphic novels; those who have the most to say turn out to be graduate students. "I am curious about the possibility of rethinking world literature through a set of media like comics and graphic novels," Edgar Garcia writes, "especially books like Dino Buzzati's *Poem Strip* or Robert Crumb's *Book of Genesis*, which textualize world myths alongside depictions of the artist's contemporary scenes: Buzzati's Orpheus is a 60s hipster in Milan and Crumb's biblical characters look like his blues musicians." "Thinking about these examples," he goes on to say, "makes me wonder why it is often necessary in these books to have world catastrophe in order to generate world dreams. Moore has said that Burroughs' technique for sequencing symbols in *Ah Pook Is Here/The Unspeakable Mr. Hart* was an influence. Could it be that some of that material becomes stock for these kinds of books too—a worlding of the Mayan myth of Ah Puch, god of death?"

It might come as a revelation to many faculty members that the Mayan god Ah Puch is alive and well, hanging out with Orpheus; that their current sponsors are comics and graphic novels; that William Burroughs is an influence on Alan Moore, coauthor of the cult classic *The Watchmen*; and that graduate students are cutting their teeth on this sort of long-distance and low-probability connections. The *Facebook* group is pedagogic in this sense: there is learning to be done here, information to change hands. And it also seems that the pedagogy is two-way, allowing the knowledge to go in either direction: it is not a foregone conclusion who is instructing and who is being instructed. Bidirectionality (or maybe even multidirectionality) seems to be one of the side effects when education is removed from its customary setting and turned into an ongoing saga, unfolding in an arena less familiar than the classroom, its capabilities still evolving, its recipients as well as its contents still being tried out. To the extent that *Facebook* is an on-site concoction, it can also serve as a laboratory of sorts. Various teaching permutations are being tried out here, enlisting not only those who consider themselves students but also those who do not.

Meanwhile, the fabric of the discussion is also new, born of the "prismatic effect of multiple, public responses," as Emily Apter observes. Comments and observations are not so much targeted as refracted. Members can weigh in at any time, without having been addressed and with no expectation that what they say will be the last word. The discussion thread can go off at a tangent and loop back, then go off once again in a different direction. It is like a soundscape—not quite music: collectively improvised, with no design, no orchestration, incorporating noise and serendipity into this multivariable environment. Not all the postings are of the same quality or length. This is actually one of the most positive aspects of this group. Members are free to post as they will and to use the postings as they wish. There is no threshold or criterion that has to be met for a posting to count. People are free to be whimsical, to make off-the-cuff comments and even slightly silly remarks, because there's no telling what might grow out of any offering. The format has been surprisingly comfortable for many. As Larry Rosenwald, a contributor, says:

> I wouldn't have guessed in advance that it would feel so different from other modes of intellectual conversation. One reason it feels that way is that it's unregulated and unhierarchical, with senior professors and graduate students on a relatively equal footing. Another reason is that contributors seem to be developing a new genre of commentary, probably blogging-influenced. Postings are conversational but also, sometimes, extended and learned, sometimes autobiographical and sometimes not.

The autobiographical dimension sometimes comes out in unexpected ways, not in

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the first-person pronoun writ large (which rarely appears) but in moments of irritation or exasperation, making these exchanges more jagged, more emotionally charged, than the procedural blandness of *Facebook* would suggest. In response to a remark that the Mogul emperor Aurangzeb was a "hardliner," Frederick Glaysher writes:

> Casting Muslims like Aurangzeb as "hardliners" is not a productive approach. It does not go deep enough into him and the thinking underlying his actions. I believe it is more helpful to understand him as someone swimming against the inevitable current of history, destined to lose in the end, disgracing the best in the tradition he thinks he's serving.
>
> In the long, dispassionate light of history, Akbar and Dara got it right and should be at the core of much more study and reflection than they even are. If our time just shrugs its shoulders, accepting conflict as always an historical reality, it might very well fail to make the effort needed to understand *how* Akbar and others constructed a space for peaceful coexistence, the humanly stable, invigorating tensions of lived life.

Glaysher is not a professor; he is a poet and an interfaith activist. The *Facebook* group did not start out with him in mind, but, with him now on board, it will bear his imprint. And there is no question that for him this exchange is anything but casual. Harmony among religions is something close to his heart, something he has worked for all his life; he is determined to use this forum to speak to a large number of people he considers "smugly nihilistic," people he otherwise has no access to. This lack of irony—lack of rhetorical temporizing—gives his comments a self-consciously nonacademic sound. They are from someone proud of not being part of the group, and *Facebook* has given him the freedom to voice that sentiment from within. In moments such as this, the rather wishful phrase "community at a distance" actually has meaning, largely because of the word *distance*. Members of this group do not enjoy physical proximity; they might not even be proximate in their intellectual orientations. Their nonproximity is what makes some of the exchanges not casual in the first place.

The presence of Aurangzeb, Akbar, and the Mogul prince Dara Shikoh suggests that there is something not casual as well in the level of detail brought into the discussion. What is being tried out here is indeed world literature, though of a sort perhaps still new to most of us, not easy to wrap our minds around, in spite of the handy label. The discussion leading up to these names begins with Milton's essay "Of True Religion" and moves on (by way of Emerson) to the legend of the three vinegar tasters—a parable of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism—taken in this case from *The Tao of Pooh*. It mentions Equiano's *Interesting Narrative* and through this unexpected lens on Islam finds its way to three contemporary novels: Bharati Mukherjee's *The Holder of the World*, Salman Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence*, and Mohsin Hamid's *Moth Smoke*. Aurangzeb, Akbar, and Dara Shikoh are resurrected in these novels, updated to become estimable players under modern circumstances. And all the major religions appear along with them, not as bodies of doctrine but as migrating words, making it across Asia, Africa, Europe, and the Americas, picking up Sanskrit, Chinese, Arabic, Persian, Hindi, and Italian, as well as English, and trailing a time frame that extends, at the very least, from the fifth century BCE to the twenty-first CE.

World literature such as this does not look like what is taught in English, comparative literature, or other literature departments. The field as it is developed haphazardly on *Facebook*, and even as it is implemented with more planning elsewhere, is perhaps best thought of as a virtual field—both in the pragmatic sense that it is filling a gap and in the ontological sense that the

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objects of study here are not so much solid objects as relational arcs, suspended precariously but tenaciously across long stretches of space and time, a scale of analysis at odds with our sharply etched divisions by nation and period. World literature, in that sense, is a limit case, far out on a limb, testing the morphologies that words acquire in their travels and the vitality of connections generated as a result. Translation, recombination, and remediation are the key processes here. Migration and evolution are its lifeblood.

Such a field (if we even use that word) is in fact nothing but a spectrum of variants, low-tech hypertexts winding their ways across the planet, long before it becomes reborn as a high-tech virtual phenomenon. It is fitting that such a phenomenon should be investigated through its online kin, a *Facebook* group. The presence of *The Tao of Pooh*, as well as comics and graphic novels, makes it clear that what shows up here is probably not anyone's canon. And if these offbeat specimens exert a gravitational pull in one direction, it is more than counteracted by other entries. Indeed, in another unexpected development, the presence of a neurobiologist, Paul Grobstein, has made the group even more experimental than it would otherwise be, putting human cognition squarely in the foreground as an undertheorized but potentially explosive axis of analysis. What does it mean to study the composition and reception of words as brain activity no less than cultural activity? And what does it mean to think of that brain activity as elemental, a common denominator to be found in anyone on this planet capable of speech? Can world literature be theorized without a reference to this basic dimension of our humanness and to the concept of species as its collective bearer? To ask these questions is to rethink the nature of our discipline in a fairly serious way. It is to study the world in terms of neural networks as much as territorial jurisdictions. And it is to revive a long-standing conversation between the humanities and the sciences, highlighting our shared biology, shared habitats, mapping these against the interplay among mind, brain, and world.

So far, our free-wheeling entries have touched on evolution, fractals, and those sensory data that are (in Anne Dalke's words) "proximately ecstatic, out-of-sync, and out-of-scale with conscious experience." Whether such phenomena can be fully explored in the domain of literature or call for research more consciously interdisciplinary remains an open question. But there is a growing sense that visual images, music, and language might rest on the same analytic as well as experiential continuum, generating comparative data at different orders of magnitude and inviting comparable observations both micro and macro. A cross-media approach, in fact, seems one of the unexpected implications of neurobiology. The fact that images, music, and words share the same scalability, the same oscillation across the threshold between the perceived and the unperceived, suggests that there is an important common ground here. These different scales of resolution are possibly linked to different kinds of brain activities; if so, evidence for this claim could come from other art forms no less than from literature,

Cognition might indeed be the "next big thing" in literary studies, as Patricia Cohen reports in a *New York Times* article. Because the *Facebook* group is unsupervised, without central planning, this possibility is registered without much fanfare. Meanwhile, the other discussion threads will go their separate ways, each propelled by its own momentum, keeping its distance, and giving the others plenty of room to stretch out. No doubt there are missed opportunities here; no doubt the connections could have been stronger, deeper, with a more durable impact. Still, for now this loosely assembled group of people, with no claim on one another and banded together in their

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nonproximity, doesn't seem a bad way for literature to sound itself out in public.

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https://doi.org/10.1632/pmla.2011.126.3.730 Published online by Cambridge University Press