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Intercultural Encounters, Translations, and Understanding as Smooth? Michael Cooperson's *Impostures* as a Translation Quandary

In *Born Translated*, Rebecca L. Walkowitz argues that "[t]he translation and circulation of literature today is historically unprecedented once we consider how quickly books enter various national markets, small and large, across several continents."[1] According to Walkowitz, nowadays an increasing number of contemporary novels are written for foreign audiences, rely on cross-linguistic circulation, and use translation as an intimate and powerful engine of production. Still, this apparently smooth intercontinental mobility of literary works together with their supple use of multiple languages and their favorable acceptance on the part of global readers may hide in fact subtle forms of linguistic and cultural dominance.

In this essay, I approach and critically evaluate Michael Cooperson's recent translation of one of the most celebrated works of medieval Arabic literature— al-Hariri's *Maqāmāt*—, a work that has been widely acclaimed. Published by the Library of Arabic Literature (NYU Press), *Impostures* won one of the Arab World's most prestigious and well-funded prizes—the 2020 Abu Dhabi Sheikh Zayed Book Award—and was one of the *Wall Street Journal*'s Top 10 Books of the Year. And yet, the praise and wide recognition with which this translation was welcomed internationally is rather surprising. Indeed, if we follow Pascale Casanova's strict division between the center and the peripheries, as theorized in *The World Republic of Letters* (2007), the book selected for translation by Cooperson would fall within those language systems and literary genres of the peripheries that, according to Casanova, are still struggling for dominance. How then did Cooperson's translation promote the upgrading and successful reception by the center of a premodern Arabic text displaying an obscure literary genre of the peripheries? In which ways did the translator manage to make such a peripheral text appealing to a global audi-

1 Walkowitz 2015, 2.

ence? And finally, to what extent did the English translation of this Arabic work favor its cross-linguistic and transnational circulation?

Al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* is indeed a classic of Arabic premodern literature, one however that appears to have little literary capital outside the Arab world mainly because of its linguistic complexity and supposedly untranslatability. As Abdelfattah Kilito notes in "Perec and Al-Harīrī": "Translated into several languages, it has been illustrated many times by painters, this being another form of translation or commentary. However, all things considered, it is an untranslatable book."[2]

In this article, I advance the idea that Cooperson's *Impostures* represents a translation quandary, since al-Hariri's classic has not been "born-translated" and has therefore not been written for translation and with a foreign audience in mind. Most important, it is a medieval masterwork that strongly affirms its singularity and cultural difference, refusing to be diluted into a global monoculture. Accordingly, *Impostures* leads me to ask, provocatively, whether Cooperson's translation—in Susan Stanford Friedman's words—manages to make "Baghdad and Basra...part of America's story"[3], or his employment of fifty different registers of English together with his use of "a bewildering variety of historical, literary, and global styles"[4] is a mere extravaganza, a skillful imitation, a boastful exhibition, ultimately hindering rather than facilitating intercultural exchange and mutual understanding across cultural and religious divides.

Not only would translation take the form of an imposture once al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* is translated from its native language into English but the Arabic precapitalist genre of the *maqāmah* itself would disturb Franco Moretti's conviction that "form is the repeatable element"[5] of a literary world-system made in the image and likeness of global capitalism, which sees the novel as the international genre *par excellence* and a pregiven global standard. Far from being replicable, the *maqāmah* is indeed a form that is highly metamorphic, unreliable, and versatile; it is, as Kilito notes, "an amalgamation, for in it we find various genres, styles, registers and tones as well as literary appropriation of such nonliterary subjects such as jurisprudence."[6] Because of its intrinsic mixture and instability then, the *maqāmah* finds no equal within the so-called world literary system neatly organized according to Euro-American standards, which—as Emily Apter rightly notes—"relegate

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2 Kilito 2014, 136.

3 Stanford Friedman 2007, 93.

4 Cooperson 2020, xl.

5 Moretti 2013, 86.

6 Kilito 2014, 136.

non-Western aesthetic modes to outlier status in the ecosystem of narrative forms."[7]

In addition to that, al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* sabotages the idea that translation is merely a derivative product, a correspondence or an equivalent of the original. Because of its peculiar amalgamation of genres, its obscure style, and its numerous allusions to Islamic jurisprudence, religious science, religious literary sources, not to mention the "verbal miracles"[8] of the Arabic language, al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* is a work of art that when translated, refuses to correspond to the original. This is why, as Cooperson explains, across time and space, translators have resorted either to a strict lexical approach or to a wide array of other responses ranging from annotations to imitation. All these different approaches, however, in Cooperson's own words, "contributed nothing to making *Impostures* part of Anglophone literary culture."[9] With his original translation, mixing "foreignizing" and "domesticating" strategies,[10] Cooperson has attempted to remodel al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* to make it respond to American expectations and tastes, while also opening it up to a potential global audience.

By closely analyzing four selected episodes of *Impostures*, the article explores issues relating to linguistic translation, textual transcodification, identity crossings, and intercultural (mis)recognition; it further considers whether Cooperson's verbal tour-de-force and acts of transcodification have ultimately managed to make this Arabic classic part of American, and by extension Anglophone, literary culture.

Impostures: A Troubling Rather Than Amusing Translation

As Cooperson explains in the "Introduction": "Etymologically, *maqāmah* indicates any occasion when one stands, and by extension a speech made before an audience."[11] As the word *maqāmah* suggests, this literary genre is rooted in an embodied practice (the act of standing and/or listening or reciting); it further mixes rhymed prose with poetic passages and is characterized by rhetorical extravaganza in the form of word games, palindromes, puns, riddles and double entendre. The

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7 Apter 2016, 11.

8 Cooperson 2020, xxv.

9 Cooperson 2020, xxxvi.

10 Venuti 2002.

11 Cooperson 2020 xviii, note 3.

genre was "invented" by al-Hamadhānī (d. 1008) and emerged in the late tenth to early eleventh century, later spreading to Persian-Tadjik and Hebrew literatures, some even say to Europe adopting the form of the picaresque novel. What gives coherence and unity but also energy and force to the narration is not the form per se, which is extremely supple and capricious, but rather the performances carried out by the two main characters. The narrative is indeed subdivided into fifty stand-alone episodes, whose continuity is assured by the recurring appearance and embodied performances of the two main characters.[12] Structurally speaking then, Cooperson's *Impostures* maintains this frame with its inner subdivision into separate episodes, while also placing great emphasis on the performative quality of the protagonist's verbal achievements and itinerant habits.

Like al-Hamadhānī's first collection, Al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* stages two men who at first sight look poles apart: 1) Abū Zayd al-Sarūjī, a well-read, eloquent beggar, who has been chased out of his native town Sarūj by the Crusaders and, as Kilito underlines, "never appears twice in the same guise"[13] and "engages in roguery without compunction"[14]; 2) al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām, who is magnetically attracted by and in constant search for the striking verbal performances and the oratorical heights of Abū Zayd, an uncontrollable passion that causes him to often fall victim to his impostures.

Since I assume with Edward Said that a literary text is "worldly" and therefore rooted in a precise socio-historical and cultural context, I wish to ask in this essay: How did Cooperson manage to transfer the cultural specificities of this peculiar Arabic genre, characterized by vertiginous linguistic games and incessant roamings across the Islamicate world, to a global (read Anglophone) audience? What remains of the distinctive socio-political, religious, and historical context of the original text in Cooperson's translation?

As the translator explains in his "Note on the Translation," in order to make Al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* legible to non-Arabophone readers, he resorted to three main translating strategies: 1) the imitation of recognized US or British authors, such as Mark Twain, Virginia Woolf, Frederick Douglass, to name just a few examples; 2) the use of global or ethno-specific varieties of English, among these Spanglish, Yiddish, Indian English, Singlish; 3) the use of specialized jargons like UCLA slang, cowboy lingo, and manager jargon.

Among the three translating strategies mentioned by Cooperson, the use of "ethno-specific varieties of speech and writing"[15] appears to be particularly prob-

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12 Kilito 2020, xii.

13 Kilito 2020, x.

14 Kilito 2020, ix.

15 Cooperson 2020, xliii, note 3.

lematic, since it raises uncomfortable questions regarding cultural appropriation, domestication, reinforcement and naturalization of monolingual pressures. I believe that these issues matter in debates about the role of American Studies on a global level and about the interaction of US literature with foreign cultures. In its updated twenty-first century Anglophone version, *Impostures* may indeed just end up being an *exercice de style*, in what Apter has called pejoratively "Globish" or, in other words, "corporate monolingualism heavily promoted by the digital humanities."[16] Cooperson's translation project of global reach may also risk elevating the translator to the rank of a "cultural universalizer, evangelizer of transcultural understanding."[17] These are the two main preoccupations that have pushed me to write this contribution.

Imitating Mark Twain: Familiarity, Competence, Ease

In Imposture 1, Cooperson makes the narrator al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām speak in the language of journeyman and satirist Mark Twain, an experienced traveler and a sharp observer of human nature and its flaws. This is how Imposture 1 opens:

> *That A-rab feller told us all about it:*
> I hadn't got any money, so I made up my mind to leave my loved ones behind, and sling a leg over the back of beyond, and see what luck I'd have. I had some adventures, which throwed me this way and that and th'other, but after a long time I landed in Sana, which is in the kingdom of Sheba. By the time I fetched up there, I was a sight to look at, without a cent in the world, or crumbs enough in my feed-bag to bait a fish-hook with. So I shoved off into town not knowing where I was going. What I was after was a fellow with a good heart in him, a fellow who'd help me, or leastways cheer me up with poetry and tales, and not look down on me for being so poor.[18]

The voice of the narrator, as Cooperson explains, is based on Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), a classic of US literature and a popular world literature text. In it, Twain uses vernacular speech, particularly "the Missouri negro dialect; the extremest form of the backwood South-Western dialect; the ordinary 'Pike County' dialect; and four modified varieties of this last."[19] He further portrays the narrator

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16 Apter 2016, 17.
17 Apter 2019, 197.
18 Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 13.
19 Twain qtd. Levine 2017, 108–9.

as unreliable, someone who "told the truth mainly" in a book that "is mostly a true book; with some stretchers."[20]

Cooperson's decision to imitate the narrative voice of *Huckleberry Finn* to communicate al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām's adventures is quite effective. Both Twain's masterpiece in guise of a translation and Al-Harīrī's original text stress the importance of (vernacular) speech and of orality more generally, place an emphasis on the performative quality of speech, and follow the itineraries of an unreliable narrator and his twin.

Twain's wanderlust, the ease with which he embodied many professions (riverboat pilot, miner, reporter, business man, writer etc.) together with the harsh criticism he expressed against mediocre people, small-minded bigots, and not so innocent American tourists make him a perfect Doppelgänger of the Arabic narrator al-Ḥārith ibn Hammām. However, readers who are unfamiliar with this US classic may feel estranged and incapable of getting all the cultural nuances expressed through Cooperson's imitative translation. The sense of estrangement for non-US readers increases when the translator includes in episode 1 two nineteenth century temperance hymns, a group of songs that belong to a distinct US musical genre and were performed between the 1840s and 1920s to add new converts, promote temperance and moderation among believers, and prohibit the drinking of wine.

Imposture 1 closes with yet another tribute to a quintessentially US icon: Cab Calloway and his international hit "Minnie the Moocher" (1931). A talented vocalist and eccentric dancer, known for his exuberant performances and the use of onomatopoeic and nonsense syllables in his solo improvisations executed to entertain an audience of exclusively white patrons at the Cotton Club,[21] Calloway is included in *Impostures* to mirror Abū Zayd's impressive rhetorical powers and make his art of disguise legible for US readers, particularly those familiar with swing and jazz music. The following passage is a good case in point:

> I got up and put on a preacher's gown
> I spoke the good word to all the folks in town
> I took their fews n' two and I bought a steak
> And I got me some wine and a honey cake
>
> Hi-dee hi-dee hi-dee hi!
> Hi-dee hi-dee hi-dee ho![22]

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20 Twain qtd. Levine 2017, 109.
21 For a critical reconstruction of the history of *The Cotton Club*, which had been "decorated with the idea of creating a 'stylish plantation environment' for its entirely white clientele," see E. Winter 2007.
22 Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 16.

Undoubtedly, by finding two iconic US counterparts—Huckleberry Finn and Cab Calloway—to express the biting satire and intoxicating performances of Abū Zayd, Cooperson facilitates the encounter between US readers and a premodern masterpiece of Arabic belle-letters. He further manages to render Abū Zayd's mastery of the Arabic language by reproducing in English the language acrobatics and scat lyrics of a popular 1930s jazz Black singer. However, the ease and rapidity with which US readers navigate and consume the English text may, in my opinion, hinder rather than facilitate intercultural understanding. The reader may indeed mistake ease with competence, facility with mastery, a false belief that may promote feelings of command and dominion, since the initial difficulty is easily resolved. As Doris Sommer notes with reference to the tight relation between readerly competence, minority literature, and textual conquests:

> Difficulty is a challenge, an opportunity to struggle and to win, to overcome resistance, uncover the codes, to get on top of it, to put one finger on the mechanisms that produce pleasure and pain, and then to call it ours. We take up an unyielding book to conquer it and to feel aggrandized, enriched by the appropriation and confidence that our cunning is equal to the textual tease of what was, after all, a planned submission as the ultimate climax or reading.[23]

Drawing from Sommer, Cooperson's *Impostures* may give US and global readers the wrong impression that intercultural competence and expertise can be acquired easily and with little effort. In addition to blurring the line separating cultural appropriation with intercultural understanding, which requires a genuine and real exchange rather than a seizure and a takeover, Cooperson's stylistic virtuosity risks opening the way to a disturbing form of mannerism, that is "an obsession with style and technique…, often outweigh[ing] the importance and meaning of subject matter."[24] As in mannerism, Cooperson's extremely skilled and polished craft tends to place "the highest value…upon the apparently effortless solution of intricate artistic problems" with the risk of oversimplifying an intercultural exchange that may in fact often be arduous and potentially fallible.[25]

Never in Cooperson's *Impostures* do US/Anglophone readers "feel the sting of exclusion"[26]; difference is indeed disguised as sameness, the unfamiliar takes on the false appearance of the familiar, spreading the wrong belief that intercultural encounters happen without any tension and are therefore straightforward and uncomplicated matters. The same limitations can be spotted more clearly in Impos-

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23 Sommer 1994, 528.

24 The Editors of Encyclopedia Britannica, "Mannerism."

25 For a positive definition of "mannerism" in literary studies, see Curtius 1948. For a structural analysis of mannerism in Arabic poetry, see Sperl 1989.

26 Sommer 1999, 2.

ture 34, where Cooperson addresses the issue of slavery, and privileges once again
continuity and autoreferentiality.

Abby Zane Alias Frederick Douglass: Adaptation, Dematerialization, Evaporation

To narrate Imposture 34, an episode in which al-Ḥārith visits the slave market and
is cheated by the seller (who is in fact Abū Zayd or Abby Zane in disguise), Cooper-
son uses the voice of "one of the most prominent black leaders of the nineteenth
century and one of the most eloquent orators in American public life"[27]: abolition-
ist Frederick Douglass (1818 – 1895). As Cooperson explains in the "Notes," the
translation is modeled on Douglass's third and last biography *Life and Times*
and the title of the episode "The fraud of slavery" is drawn precisely from that
work. Abby Zane's narration in this episode is further intertwined with poetic pas-
sages, whose language reproduces the rhetoric and vocabulary used in "posters ad-
vertising the sale of enslaved persons in the United States, or announcing rewards
for the capture of runaways."[28] Once again, the readers of *Impostures* are catapult-
ed from Western Yemen back to the US:

> *Mr. Harress Ben Hammam related this outrage:*
> When I crossed the wilderness to Zabíd, I was accompanied by a boy whom I had brought up
> and raised to bodily strength and maturity of judgement. He had so far accustomed himself to
> my character that he was able to gratify my desires in every way and to anticipate my wants
> with perfect accuracy. No wonder that I had become deeply attached to him and trusted him
> without reserve, both at home and on the road. We had no sooner reached Zabíd, however,
> when he took ill and died.[29]

The central subject of this episode is slavery, since Imposture 34 centers on the sell-
ing of a boy at the slave market of Zabíd. The original Arabic text offers, in the
words of Cooperson, "one of the most powerful denunciations of slavery"[30] includ-
ed in a premodern text. Still, I wonder how much of the original condemnation
actually reaches the Anglophone reader and to what extent Cooperson's decision
to imitate the language of an iconic US abolitionist, such as Frederick Douglass,
really contributes to illuminate the practice of slavery in early Islamicate history.

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27 Miller 2002, 1814.
28 Cooperson 2020, 323.
29 Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 316.
30 Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 315.

In other words, what happens if we bring the little-known history of the Zabíd's slave trade in relation to the more famous New Orleans Slave Auction as Cooperson does in *Impostures?* Isn't there the risk of erasing meaningful differences and of transforming two distinctive cities with their own specific histories of racial slavery into a dematerialized sameness? Finally, does this dematerialization also cause the historic atrocity of slavery to evaporate and disappear?

On the one hand, Cooperson's translation has certainly the merit of having lifted what David Gakunzi has called "the taboo" concerning the Arab-Muslim slave trade, by juxtaposing it with the more famous Trans-Atlantic slave trade.[31] On the other, Cooperson's translation of episode 34 retains little of the foreignness of the original and therefore fails in the end to educate readers about the specific locale, history, and politics, in which the so-called "veiled genocide"—to quote Tidiane N'Diaye's important study—took place.[32] Undoubtedly, Cooperson's translation makes the painful experience of an enslaved boy in a remote Yemeni slave market accessible to US readers. However, as Douglass himself had noted, a free, white person "cannot see things in the same light with the slave, because he does not, and cannot, look from the same point from which the slave does."[33] Reminding readers of their specific location and ensuing limited perspective may be an important gesture when approaching a literary work steeped in a foreign culture. Even more so, if the text in question addresses African slavery in the Islamicate world.

Chicanos, New York Gangsters, and Marginal Roughs: Rhapsody, Artifice, Fabrication

The general tendency to eliminate cultural distance and any "indigestible residue,"[34] which may force US readers particularly, and Anglophone readers more generally, to hesitate a bit, take notice of the foreignness of the original text, and consequently put their "voracious mastery"[35] on hold for a while, is even more evident in episode 16. In order to reproduce the *maghribiyyah* or "Far Western" location of Abū Zayd in Imposture 16, Cooperson uses Spanglish as a "far-Western variety of English" interspersed with bits of Cervantes and the Spanish

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31 Gakunzi 2018.

32 N'Diaye 2017.

33 Douglass qtd. Sommer 1994, 532.

34 Sommer 1999, 15.

35 Sommer 1999, 15.

Bible to convey Abū Zayd's Qur'anic and literary allusions.[36] Cooperson's geographical, linguistic, and cultural transition from the Medieval province of al-Andalus to the contemporary Chicano borderland produces paradoxically, what Jacob Rama Berman in *American Arabesque* has called, with reference to nineteenth-century American culture, an "arabesque aesthetics so unmoored, so uniquely American."[37] The following passage is particularly telling in this sense:

> *El Xaret Benamam tol' us:*
> Una vez I assisted a la prejer de la tarde en una mezquita de Marruecos. Cuando finishé la parte obligatoria y two more rakas for if the flies, I noticed un grupo de amigos who seemed closer than fingernails and grime. Se habían retirado off to the side, donde they were havin' una animada discusíon full of guiticismos. Ahora como ustedes saben I'm always buscando new giros de frase. So I go op to them like a crasheador de bailes.[38]

Cooperson's original choice in employing forms of speech that have been historically downgraded by the monolingual ideal is absolutely praiseworthy; this translating practice, however, has its own limits since, as Cooperson himself explains, it is essentially "a re-creation" which "relies on borrowing, adaptation, calques, and humorously literal transpositions of idioms."[39] This is, in the end, a fictional language that once again hinders rather than facilitates the reader's encounter with cultural difference generally, and with the (often painful) historical and lived experience of Chicanos in the US particularly. This amusing yet artificial translation fails, quoting Rajagopalan Radhakrishnan, to "drive home the point that any undertaking on behalf of the world should be an acknowledgment and a remediation of existing historical wrongs, inequities, and imbalances and not a rhapsodic celebration of the ideal elsewhereness of the world."[40]

In ways similar to a World Literature field that tries to be all-embracing, dissolves difference into sameness, and annuls antagonisms of all sorts, Cooperson's *Impostures* appears to be menaced by the same risk. To quote Apter: "promoting an ethic of liberal inclusiveness or the formal structures of cultural similitude, often has the collateral effect of blunting political critique."[41] Despite its good intentions and the translator's undeniable talent, *Impostures* gradually emerges as a world curled in itself, self-centered, and innocent of politics, while giving the impression of being open to differences of all sorts. Rather than reproducing the de-

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36 Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 135.
37 Berman 2012, 24.
38 Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 135–6.
39 Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 143.
40 Radhakrishnan 2016, 1402.
41 Apter 2013, 41.

stabilizing multiplicity of the original, shifting between *genres* and discourses but also between the cultural masculine elite and its popular, streetwise counterpart, Cooperson's English translation seems to reinvigorate cultural homogeneity; while circulating the dream of one globally legible world, *Impostures* paradoxically reinforces isolated cultural niches. The transformation of the 51 episodes into "self-enclosed cultural compartments"[42] tends to propagate the cultural partitions that World Literature is sometimes accused of producing and reproducing.

The fabrication of a fictional language system disguised as authentic is brought to the extreme in episode 7, in which the protagonist is made to speak, in the translator's own words, "the argot spoken by mid-nineteenth-century swindlers, thieves, rowdies in New York as compiled by George Matsell (chief of police in NY) in his *Vocabulum; or the Rough's Lexicon* (1859)."[43] This was, as Cooperson himself admits, "a literary language" that was hardly spoken by anyone and is therefore made-up and inauthentic. The same definition can also be applied to specialized jargons like UCLA slang, cowboy lingo, and manager jargon, which Cooperson also uses and which call to mind Apter's definition of "Globish" as "an instrumental, impoverished basic English, a language of branding and digital communication, a 'patois of managementese.'"[44] Both the supposedly place- and time-specific argot of NYC and Apter's "Globish" are fabricated languages and therefore in the end commodities that can circulate across the globe without much impediment.

Never is untranslatability recognized as a value in *Impostures* nor is the importance of a respectful distance emphasized as a contractionary gesture capable of balancing what Apter has defined with reference to World Literature as the otherwise unlimited "expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavors."[45] In a similar way, Cooperson's translation project of global reach often glosses over and refuses to bring home the frictions, silences, untranslatables, irreducible differences, and strategic refusals that are also an essential part of the intercultural encounter. This absence, even if initially comforting, becomes extremely daunting after a while, since it reinforces the wrong conviction that intercultural encounters are essentially smooth, horizontal, and fluid. This is exactly the opposite of what literary education should teach, if we want our students to be aware of and well equipped with tools that allow them to navigate a world made up of inequalities and unassimilable differences of all sorts. Indeed, as Sommer notes: "If we manage to include among our reading requirements the an-

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42 Hiddleston 2016, 1391.

43 Al-Ḥarīrī 2020, 59.

44 Apter 2016, 17.

45 Apter 2013, 2.

ticipation of strategic refusals, because differences coexist and do not reduce to moments in a universal history of understanding, this will be no minor adjustment, but a halting yet more promising approach."[46]

The Risk of "Oneworldedness": Coverage, Incorporation, Standardization

On the whole, *Impostures* participates in the formation of what Sherry Simon calls "new forms of knowledge, new textual forms, new relationships to language,"[47] since it makes a new textual form (the *maqāmah*) available to Anglophone readers; it further enables their encounter with a very rich and rather unfamiliar form of knowledge (that of medieval Arabic oral culture and its aesthetics of verbal wonder), in which the linguistic medium emerges as a supple and ambiguous tool, an instrument of communication that can be used either to impress and mesmerize or to cheat and deceive. In that sense, it enriches the target language with an incredible series of variations and potentialities.

Furthermore, *Impostures* deserves credit for showing Anglophone readers that Sana, Basra, and Zabíd may be good sites from which to rethink the world republic of letters, particularly the binaries secular vs. religious, modern vs. medieval, central vs. peripheral, which are generally used to classify literary works along the line of what Casanova has called the "Greenwich meridian" of world literary culture.[48] *Impostures* blurs these artificial divisions, showing that the world created by al-Harīrī is extremely changeable, ambiguous, and dynamic. Despite these important qualities, *Impostures* tends, in my opinion, to reproduce a world in which English is the dominant language or a colonial linguistic residue (as in the case of Nigerian, Indian, and Singaporean Englishes) and the so-called Global South is reduced, as it is often the case in works that engage the globe, to "a physical setting for American culture."[49] It follows that the rich and heterogeneous world of Al-Harīrī's *Maqāmāt* emerges paradoxically and unexpectedly as "oneworldedness," that is "as a relatively untractable monoculture that travels through the world absorbing difference."[50]

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46 Sommer 1999, xv.
47 Simon 2018, 160.
48 Casanova 2007.
49 Aboul-Ela 2018, 20.
50 Apter 2013, 83.

If Wolfgang Goethe's nineteenth-century formulation of world literature re-lied, according to Baidik Bhattacharya, "on the empire for material as well as sym-bolic organization as an innocent roadmap to chart the worldly trajectories of lit-erature,"[51] so Cooperson's *Impostures* appears to reproduce "the imperial standardization of cultural practices,"[52] albeit in an updated globalized version. His translation, in other words, does not trouble received definitions of the global produced in the so-called First World but rather reinforces them by following a program of "relentless coverage."[53] It further refuses, in the words of Vilashini Cooppan, "to imagine the other as other" and "to locate the other in space-times not our own."[54] In *Impostures*, the Other disturbingly coincides with the Self, who is located in a familiar space and time. Cooperson indeed takes out the orig-inal text from its native culture and reinscribes it alternatively on the banks of the lower Mississippi river in the mid-nineteenth century, in 1818 Maryland, in the Chi-cano "Far West" of the 1970s, and in the underworld of NYC in the first half of the 19th century. In doing so, he contributes—if we follow Issa J. Boullata's harsh words in "The Case for Resistant Translation"—to "violate [...] a text by taking it out of its culture and inscribing it into another."[55]

I definitely see in Cooperson's work "the attitude of sympathy and attraction necessary for effective translation"[56]; and yet, when reflecting on the relationship to otherness that his translation enables, the following doubts arise: What kind of intercultural encounters and transactions does Cooperson's translation promote? To what extent is translation, in the illuminating words of Apter, "an act of love, and an act of disruption [...] a means of repositioning the subject in the world and in history; a means of rendering self-knowledge foreign to itself; a way of de-naturalizing citizens, taking them out of the comfort zone of national space, daily ritual, and pre-given domestic arrangements?"[57]

At least as I see it, *Impostures* does not seem to pose any limit or obstacle to the reader's potentially infinite capacity of universal comprehension; it does not invite him/her to proceed with caution when engaged with a medieval Arabic mas-terpiece, to the point that its readers, in Sommer's own words, may easily "mistake a privileged center for the universe."[58] The effortless fluidity and consequent de-

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51 Bhattacharya 2018, 9.
52 Bhattacharya 2018, 7.
53 Radhakrishnan 2016, 1402.
54 Cooppan 2009, 39.
55 Boullata 2003, 29.
56 Simon 2018, 163.
57 Apter 2006, 6.
58 Sommer 1999, xii.

tachment that *Impostures* promotes recalls the 'frictionlessness' of some of the works included in the now *à la mode* rubric of World Literature. To quote Christian Thorne in "The Sea is not a Place": "And world literature is the name for a certain tendency toward abstraction within the global literary system, the propensity of works aiming for an international readership to make themselves frictionless."[59] *Impostures*, in my opinion, fails to transpose the reader to what Marina Warner has called "the motley, mobile, tumultuous, polyglot and polymorphous urban culture of the Levant"[60], even though I recognize that it transposes her/him to many other, often fictional locations. It further misses the opportunity to offer, in Pheng Cheah's own words, "the image and timing of another world."[61] The (world) community that *Impostures* re-creates is indeed an overwhelmingly American one, to the point that we as readers are never confronted with the disturbing feeling that the type of reading we are performing—to borrow Edwidge Danticat's apt formulation—, is a dangerous one, capable of placing us outside our center of gravity.[62] Especially US readers feel extremely safe and incredibly at home in *Impostures*, as the Other speaks in the familiar voice of the Self.

Far from following Michel Serres's precious advice in *The Troubadour of Knowledge* to embark on a risky journey to truly encounter the Other, the readers of *Impostures* remain comfortably seated in their usual chairs. Serres's invitation to "[d]epart: go forth. Leave the womb of your mother, the crib, the shadow cast by your father's house and the landscapes of your childhood"[63] remains unheeded. The world fabricated in *Impostures* has indeed the familiar design of one's all too known living room. It follows that the US readers of *Impostures* feel competent and at ease as they navigate the text, in ways similar to the educated readers targeted by Sommer in *Proceed with Caution.* They even feel, quoting Sommer again, "entitle[d] to know a text, possibly with the possessive and reproductive intimacy of Adam-who-knew-Eve."[64] And this, I argue in this article, is certainly an imposture, since culturally foreign texts require a more discreet and humble engagement on the part of their readers. Among others, Lorna Burns has underlined the danger in World Literature of erasing meaningful difference for the sake of self-identification. To quote Burns: "By prioritizing the national as the primary identification of the reader and the text, world literature emerges as a process of extending outwards to impose national values on works that bear the signs of

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59 Thorne qtd. Burns 2019, 31.
60 Warner 2012, 20.
61 Cheah 2008, 36.
62 Danticat 2010.
63 Serres 2006, 8.
64 Sommer 1994, 524.

difference and, at the same time, as resistance to complete acceptance of the foreign text as recognizable literature."[65]

Despite these limits, Cooperson's *Impostures* is undoubtedly a passionate, important, and dedicated work of translation, one that forewarns readers of the lures and perhaps even the swindles not only of World Literature but also of translation projects with a global reach. Indeed, as David J. Roxburgh writes with reference to al-Ḥarīrī's *Maqāmāt:* "Although Abu Zayd uses his linguistic brilliance and guile to dupe people, no one is ever really hurt as a result but is instead deprived of money, valuables, other personal possessions, or the kindness expected in light of the hospitality they extended to a stranger. Those tricked by Abu Zayd survive with bruised egos, their human frailties exposed."[66] It is then not only the frailties of the readers' damaged egos that *Impostures* splendidly exposes, but also those of global translation projects and of World Literature themselves.

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65 Burns 2019, 25.

66 Roxburgh 2013,172.

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