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NEGOTIATING WORLD LITERATURE

LA *RÉPUBLIQUE MONDIALE DES LETTRES* is a brave but flawed book.¹ Pascale Casanova enters the game, increasingly played out not only in literature but also in literary criticism, nowadays routinely known as going global—although to her great credit she refuses to traffic in the term ‘globalization’ and its tacky Third Way *idées reçues*. In the pages of the NLR and more extensively elsewhere, Franco Moretti has sought to map literary history onto ‘geography’, space onto time. Space inflected by time, moreover, yields a geography that is fluid rather than fixed. As borders blur, nation-states implode and the ‘world’ both speeds up and contracts, ‘migration’ has become the new buzz-word. Re-writing the literary map against this background calls for special ways of thinking and seeing, whose own borders are, necessarily and often productively, also blurred. The customary starting point for this project is the idea (and the ideal) of *Weltliteratur*, sketched by Goethe as the dream of ‘a common world literature transcending national limits’. ‘We hear and read everywhere’, Goethe wrote, ‘of the progress of the human race, of the wider prospects in world relationships between men. How far this is the case is not within my province to examine or to determine: for my part I seek only to point out to my friends my conviction that a universal world literature is in process of formation.’ What Goethe imagined here was a kind of grand cosmopolitan gathering of (some of) the literatures of the world to engage in what an influential commentator on Goethe calls ‘an international conversation’.²

Goethe’s idea, however generously conceived, is of its time, and hence circumscribed and constrained by the presuppositions and preoccupations

of an age that is no longer ours. In the first place, although Goethe's aspiration is towards a transcendence of the 'national' ('national literature has not much meaning nowadays'), the parties to the imagined conversation are essentially national literatures. World literature concerns 'the relationship of nation to nation'. Secondly, there are the limiting implications of the central, even privileged, place assigned by Goethe to Europe in his account. While it would be absurd to accuse Goethe of a kind of blind Eurocentrism, given the extraordinary sensitivity with which he entered into the spirit of Persian and Chinese literatures, in several of the fragments there is what appears to be a virtual identification of world literature with European literature ('a European, in fact a universal world literature', 'European, in other words, World Literature'). But, for all its limits, Goethe's example matters a great deal. If we start here, it is at once to acknowledge those limits and then to take from him what is useful for our own times.

A later definition by one of the founders of the discipline of comparative literature, Richard G. Moulton, describes world literature as 'the autobiography of civilization'. The definition is at once curious and attractive, but also problematic, principally because the analogy with autobiography not only reads back through time from what is essentially a very modern notion, but also implies a view of the history and structure of world literature as a single, coherent story told by a single subject. In today's conditions, we are more likely to want to break up and diversify this story and its subjects according to the plurality of human cultures. Perhaps, then, we might start to re-define the idea of world literature in terms of an observation by Carlos Fuentes, to the effect that 'reading, writing, teaching, learning, are all activities aimed at introducing civilizations to each other'. This version, which resembles the characterization of Goethe's idea as an 'international conversation', is likely to speak to us more powerfully and directly. But it too is problematic. In the first place, such 'introductions' do not necessarily constitute a polite get-together. The terms on which civilizations 'meet', both in and out of books, are not necessarily, or even generally, those of equal parties to

¹ Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres*, Seuil: Paris 1999, 493 pp., 202 035853 0.

² Fritz Stich, *Goethe and World Literature*, Port Washington, NY 1972. See also Franco Moretti, 'Conjectures in World Literature', *NLR* 1, Jan–Feb 2000, and *Atlas of the European Novel*, Verso: London 1998.

the encounter. Moreover, the effects of such meetings can range widely across a spectrum from exhilaration to anxiety and vertigo, as questions are raised, problems explored and identities challenged.

Furthermore, in so far as Fuentes's view is a version of what we now call 'multiculturalism', there is the quite fundamental issue as to who actually gets invited to the meeting in the first place; as the Japanese–American poet, David Mura, has argued, for many literatures multiculturalism is a matter of sheer 'survival', of whether or not there will be any representation at all at the international rendezvous. This is a two-way consideration, involving both terms of the expression 'world literature': it concerns not only who is included in the 'world', but also what belongs to 'literature'. Indeed arguably the most basic question—or at least the first—has to do with what counts as 'literature'. What is normally understood by it in the West (imaginative writing, plays, poems, novels, etc.) is of relatively recent invention. The history of the idea of 'literature' in fact reveals a process of increasing specialization of meanings, whereby 'literature' is originally equated with all kinds of writing; then, in the post-Gutenberg era, with printed works; and only much later restricted to the notion of works of the imagination. Above all, we need to sever the idea of literature or, more generally, verbal art from a fixed attachment to writing. Henry Louis Gates has shown how the European Enlightenment established a link between 'reason', 'civilization' and writing, thus confining oral culture to a position of inferiority, often attaching the pejorative valuation 'barbaric' or 'savage'. The argument that a culture attains to civilization only when it is capable of 'inscribing' itself not only devalues the oral tradition in the name of a specious fable of 'development', but also overlooks the very real ambiguity of the acquisition of writing: at once an immense cultural gain, but also helping to institute structures of power and domination, within which those who have the skills of writing and reading enjoy advantages over those who do not. Finally it also overlooks the simple fact that, both historically and geographically, the oral vastly exceeds the written; the former is and even today remains the most fundamental mode of mankind's self-expression.

World horizons

How then does one enter, delimit and define the object of study known as world literature? To some extent, help has been to hand from the now

well-established 'world-systems' theory, developed in that paradoxically specialized branch of historiography known as world history, and whose most distinguished practitioners include Fernand Braudel, Immanuel Wallerstein, William McNeill and Janet Abu-Lughod. McNeill divides human history into three constitutive phases: first, from around 3500 BC (early Mesopotamia) to 500 BC; secondly, from 500 BC to 1500 AD; and thirdly, from 1500 AD to the present. The first phase witnesses the emergence of four major civilizations: the Middle East (Egypt, Mesopotamia and Asia Minor); India; China; and Greece (defined, in conjunction with the later emergence of the Roman Empire, as the starting point of a 'European' civilization). The second phase (500 BC to 1500 AD) is at once a period of the consolidation and extension of the above, along with the birth of Christianity, the rise of Islam in the seventh century AD, the creation of the Ottoman Empire and the installation of feudalism (notably in Europe and Japan). The third period, from around 1500 AD onwards, is broadly the period of the creation of the 'modern' world, crucially linked to the so-called 'rise of the West', fuelled by economic take-off in Europe, the expansion of the world trading system and the related colonial adventures of 'discovery' and conquest (initially of the Americas and then later vast portions of the globe), and issuing finally in a form of modernity that McNeill calls 'global cosmopolitanism'.

Wallerstein charts in great detail the place of Europe in these developments, in a comprehensive survey of the principal factors in the formation of the 'modern world-system': techniques of modern capitalism and technologies of modern science, especially of transport, communications and warfare; division of labour, both occupational and geographical; constant expansion of the system (imperialism) but with a 'skewed distribution of its rewards'; a multiplicity of cultures and fluid boundaries but with power residing in the metropolitan centres and nation-states of the West. On the other hand, Janet Abu-Lughod—in a book significantly titled, *Before European Hegemony*—takes the formation of the world-system back into the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, arguing that, in the period before the West became dominant, regions of the so-called Old World had already established a complicated network of contacts through a trading economy and a system of exchange, stretching from North West Europe to China across the Middle East and India. This system consisted of eight sub-systems, or 'loops', grouped into three larger circuits of trade. The Middle East was a 'geographic fulcrum',

while Europe was more at the 'periphery'. India also was a fulcrum, with land routes to Russia in the north and China in the east, as well as having links to the Muslim world. The whole network depended on the strategic role of a number of 'world cities', especially Baghdad and Cairo, and the geographically variable use of a multiplicity of languages, principally Arabic, Greek, vernaculars of Latin and Mandarin Chinese.

Quite how one might adapt the long temporal and spatial reach of world history to the idea of world literature is not straightforwardly obvious. For one thing the parameters of inquiry are not identical. In the perspectives of world history, one might be tempted to classify the 'literatures' of the world into three broad kinds: folk literatures (that is, orally transmitted unwritten literatures), traditional literatures and modern, cosmopolitan literatures. The study of 'world literature' does not typically seek to incorporate all of these and it is difficult to conceive of a methodology which could cope with such a vaulting ambition (for one thing, it would be impossible to avoid the inbuilt ethnocentrism of literary-historical periodizations). Rather it concerns itself with printed literatures that in some way have entered into 'relations' with others, whose historical point of departure is usually the European Renaissance and the development of national literary traditions, and whose current terminus is the literary world 'marketplace' of the late twentieth century. 'World' here thus does not mean 'global'—in the sense of all the literatures of the world—but rather 'international', structures that arise and transactions that occur across national borders.

In this context, Franco Moretti has taken from Wallerstein's world-systems theory the formula 'one but unequal' as a basis for re-thinking the idea of world literature. Although—amazingly—there is no reference to either in Casanova's book (she does cite Braudel's formula of 'unequal structures'), this notion underlies her entire project. Goethe's vision does enter the picture, but less as some ecumenical gathering (in anticipation of his notion of world literature, Goethe once referred to literature as a 'common world-council') than as a competitive market. Echoing Antoine Berman's association of *Weltliteratur* with *Weltmarkt* and quoting Goethe himself, in a letter to Carlyle, on the formation of a 'general intellectual commerce' and a 'market where all nations offer their goods', Casanova proceeds to the construction of a fully-fledged theory of the international literary system based on relations of competition. In respect of its Goethean provenance, one should per-

haps not press too hard on what is basically an analogy; her claim that Goethe's idea of a 'market' is 'in no way metaphorical' is strictly for the birds. There is, of course, a literal sense in which one can speak of trade here, for instance Franco Moretti's reflections in *Atlas of the European Novel* on the functioning of 'narrative markets' in the nineteenth century, an import-export trade carried out largely on the back of translations. Casanova glances at this sort of thing, especially in connexion with the international book trade in the late twentieth century. But how far the analogy of *Weltmarkt* helps us make sense of Goethe's thinking remains moot. Goethe does not appear to have construed the circulation and exchange of works of literature across national borders as competitive, and it is unclear how he could have done so, since this would presuppose the existence of an international or common market in which literary 'value' was comparatively and competitively assessed. For Goethe, the economic conditions permitting greater circulation pointed more towards an internationalization of reading publics, a new cosmopolitanism of reading.

Competing nations

Rivalry and competition, however, are the foregrounded concepts of Casanova's account, buttressed by the theoretical underpinning of Bourdieu's work on the constitution of the literary 'field' (although mercifully she stays away from the most pathological form of the theory of literature as agonistic war-zones, Harold Bloom's). The main contenders in this arena are nations, where there are winners and losers. The international is thus not the result or expression of some free-wheeling global cosmopolitanism but of, precisely, the inter-national, a cultural conflict between nations and national literatures to control the rhythms and outcomes of what she terms 'literary time'. Literary time is related but not reducible to the time of political history (here we catch an implicit genuflection to the model of history as 'series'). The great prize is what Casanova fetchingly calls the Greenwich Mean Time of literary history. The winners determine Greenwich Mean Time by instituting a regime of centre and periphery: the 'developed' who stipulate and defend the norms of the 'literary', and the 'backward' who strive to catch up. Rivalry creates a 'space' at once riven by the contest for domination and, ultimately, unified by the cross-border movements the competition unleashes.

Historically, the argument is centred on three moments. It begins in the sixteenth century, with Du Bellay's *Deffence et Illustration de la langue françoise*. It matters very much that she start here, by virtue of the fact that Du Bellay's text is a proto-nationalist document in which the assertion of the virtues of French against the dominion of Latin (and Antiquity generally) coincides with the formation of the nation-state. The obvious earlier candidate for starting point, Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*, is dismissed because Dante's model of a vernacular literary language, based on a composite of Tuscan dialects, does not have the backing of a unified Italian kingdom; the Dante/Boccaccio/Petrarch axis is thus something of a false dawn. For Casanova, Du Bellay's tract sets in motion a historical process whereby France—more particularly, Paris—emerges as the dominant force in the shaping of the Republic of Letters. Paris becomes the centre par excellence of the international literary order, reigning supreme right up until the late twentieth century. Casanova rebuts the anticipated charge of Gallocentrism by claiming, persuasively, that this has nothing to do with tricolour-waving patriotism and everything to do with the historical facts.³ It does so by projecting

³ It should be noted however that the persuasiveness of placing Paris centre-stage is largely of an empirical sort, based for the most part (above all where the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are concerned) on a proliferating list of the non-French writers who fantasized, eulogized or visited Paris from different parts of the world. At a deeper level the argument would require a more theoretically robust explanation than that implied by purely anecdotal accumulation. Certainly the notion that Du Bellay's intervention somehow single-handedly set the whole process in motion strains plausibility. Moreover her Paris-centred story stops somewhere in the 1960s. It is by no means clear that Paris has remained the magnet since then, and it would not be mere Anglophone prejudice to assert that London and New York have 'overtaken' Paris as the key metropolitan loci. A further consideration arises here, to do with the scope of Casanova's study as a whole. Her remit is very wide-ranging geographically and quantitatively (the index of authors clocks in at around seven hundred entries), while her own overt sympathies are with the non-European (more accurately non-Western European), historically 'under-represented' literatures of the world; suggesting indeed that, rather like Edward Said's *Orientalism*, with which it has spiritually much in common, the book itself will travel widely. On the other hand, her theoretical frame of reference creates the impression of an inescapably Eurocentric purview. Wherever she goes, Europe—and Paris in particular—seem not to be far behind. Latin America gets a good billing but most especially in terms of those writers who at one point or other end up in Europe. Even the Brazilian writers who took a principled stand against European influence are defined largely in terms of this Europe-referring stance. North America is chiefly represented by Faulkner but, again, largely Faulkner as read in Europe (although also Algeria, with half a page on Faulkner in Latin

itself, and being perceived, as a de-nationalized locus of the universal, home to the classic, guardian of taste, resolver of quarrels, arbiter of the new, host to the avant-garde—in short, all the cultural appurtenances with which a geographical capital accumulates, hoards and dispenses, in the somewhat unfortunate economic metaphor which she also takes from Bourdieu, literary capital. While it is perfectly legitimate to think of literary works as ‘commodities’, sold by authors to publishers and from there to readers, it is arguably illicit to extend the relevant thought to the notion of ‘capital’.

Orbiting around the Sun City, like so many provincial satellites or menacing predators (England), is more or less everybody else, in a historical trajectory running until our own time. The second moment highlighted in this relatively *longue durée* is the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, as the period of what Casanova calls the ‘Herder-effect’, with the development of various resistances to French literary rule, largely in the form of a turn to folk traditions and the corresponding ideologies of tribal nationalism (she does not herself use the term ‘tribal’; acquaintance with Martin Thom’s *Republics, Nations and Tribes* might well have tempered her admiration for this sort of stuff and modified the narrative of poor relations struggling for admission to the Pantheon). The third moment concerns the effects of empire and, later in the twentieth century, of decolonization, characterized by the flow across national boundaries and a strong pull to the metropolitan centres of the West—still crucially Paris, whose authority as centre of a dominant national culture is at once confirmed and yet contested (or dissolved) by the

America). Russia enters the picture by way of another émigré, Nabokov; otherwise silence. The Arab world scarcely figures beyond North Africa, as related to France, although sub-Saharan Africa gets more coverage (Chinua Achebe, Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa’s collection of Yoruba tales). Japan gets a brief entry on the poet Sakutarō Hagiwara, with even a quotation from one of his poems (instructively the one that, in French translation, begins with the line: ‘*Ah! Je voudrais aller en France*’) but is otherwise mentioned only in terms of its colonial relations with Korea (another ‘small literature’). China is pretty well off the map. For the Indian subcontinent, she rounds up the usual suspects (Tagore, Rushdie). The choices of course make sense in terms of her working hypotheses and, as I have already suggested, whatever ‘world literature’ can be taken to mean it can’t mean *all* the literatures of the world. But it would not be unreasonable to maintain that the hypotheses themselves skew the picture, such that the inclusions and omissions, as well as the distribution of emphasis in the discussions, constantly return us in one way or another to the shores of the *Vieux Continent*.

arrival of outsider figures from all parts of the globe, those whom she terms the 'ex-centrics'. This supplies the essential form of the modern international literary system: multiple, heterogeneous but also stratified and hierarchical. In connexion with the 'ex-centrics', she sketches three typologies: the 'rebels', who stay at home to cultivate their local cultural patch—a (post)colonial extension of the Herder-effect—or who, after wandering, return home (for example, the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o quitting English for his native Gikuyu); the 'assimilated', who are absorbed into the system on its own terrain (Naipaul); and the 'revolutionaries', whose basic position vis-à-vis Greenwich Mean Time is neither avoidance nor assimilation but subversion (Beckett and others too numerous to mention). The revolutionaries are the real heroes of the tale, producing a new measure of literary time, a *patrimoine littéraire mondial*, a truly international form of literary capital, for the most part in Paris. What makes them heroes is that, in besieging the citadels of the literary imperium, they succeed in conquering not only for themselves but for the institution of literature a certain 'freedom' and 'autonomy'; literature not only becomes fully international, it also becomes 'literature', a practice finally freed from its subjection to national imperatives. There are thus two kinds of literary 'autonomy': a false or mystified kind, which arises when a major literary power has accumulated enough literary 'capital' to allow the writer to go about his or her business relatively unmolested (in this reminiscent of Gramsci's 'traditional intellectual'); and a true autonomy, hard-won in the struggles of the 'ex-centric' to enter the force field of the literary system.

If we stand back and ask what are the key questions subtending Casanova's account, they would seem to be twofold and interrelated: the nature and significance of relations between national literatures, and the status of the competitive model of literary history. These are without doubt genuinely interesting questions.⁴ The devil, as ever, is in the

⁴ We can jettison Casanova's use of the term 'republic' as an intellectual non-starter. This has become something of a bad habit in French literary scholarship, often little more than a jingle empty of any kind of determinate meaning. The modern sense of the Republic of Letters is an invention of the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. In the first place, its members were scholars, not imaginative writers. In the second place, they did not think of themselves as representatives of 'national' traditions and still less as caught up in relations of rivalry and competition. They saw themselves (perhaps a delusion) as participants in a cooperative community of knowledge. Finally, the *modus operandi* of the Republic of Letters

detail. It is not that the national-competitive model is irrelevant; on the contrary, it can be made to do much useful work. In particular it should be stressed that, unlike many of her precursors who deploy the competitive view, Casanova does see that, if it has any grip at all, it is at the level of the national, given that nation-state relations really do unfold historically as a field of rivalry. It is simply that in her hands it is made to do *all* the work—accorded such grand explanatory powers that it is effectively posited as capable of accounting for everything. But for this claim to stand up it would have to be subjected, Popper-style, to a range of counter-considerations, none of which get a look in.

Domestic conflicts

The most predictable objection to the model is that there are variables other than nation and relations other than competition. Take two examples (one mentioned by Casanova, the other not) from the canon of one of the more powerful players in the alleged rivalry game, English literature. Both Wordsworth and Shakespeare have been adduced as major figures in the unfolding of the ‘national genius’, the making of the ‘Englishness’ of English literature, with particular reference to an alleged rivalry with French hegemony. There are unquestionably ‘competitive’ impulses animating Wordsworth’s appeal to the language (specifically, the diction) of the ‘common man’, in the Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, as the basis for a new kind of poetry, attuned to the textures of the ordinary and the everyday. It might just be possible to hear in this a very distant echo of a nationalist hostility, based on an assumed English common-sense empiricism of ‘experience’, to the formality and artificiality of French literary culture. But whereas in the roughly contemporary case of the German turn to ‘folk’ material we hear this not so much as an echo than as a roar, Wordsworth’s competitive agenda seems to involve very different variables, such as class, gender and region, all of which are *internal* to pressures and debates within England itself. The appeal

was that of the private communication, thus quite distinct from the more commercially based conditions that permit the international flows Goethe has in mind when, in the early nineteenth century, he formulates the idea of *Weltliteratur*; in these terms, we might indeed wish to see the latter as *replacing* rather than complementing the older Latinate Republic of Letters. See Anne Goldgar, *Impolite Learning. Conduct and Community in the Republic of Letters 1680–1750*, New Haven 1995. I am also grateful to Stephan Hoesel-Uhlig for his helpful comments on this point.

to the language of the *common* man is a class-based move, directed at the polite discourse of eighteenth-century English poetry; the appeal to the common *man*, an attempt to restore masculine virtues in the face of the ‘feminizing’ influence of the late eighteenth-century poetesses; and the location of these possibilities, in the world of the Lake District, as the opening of a regional divide between North and South, rural and urban. Relative to these concerns, nation seems to come way down the list. Wordsworth’s case tells us not only that inter-national competition is not necessarily the primary motor of absolutely pivotal literary developments but also that a monolithic image of ‘nation’ can mask all manner of divisions and constituencies. It is a major shortcoming of her book that Casanova treats every single literary/linguistic community from the sixteenth century onwards as if it were, actually or aspirationally, national in character.

Shakespeare or Racine?

Secondly, take the deployment of Shakespeare from the eighteenth century onwards in the formation of a ‘national’ literary identity in England. Casanova has it that the use of Shakespeare in the constitution of the ‘Englishness’ of English literature is to be understood principally in terms of national rivalry with France and French neoclassical drama. Here she takes her cue from Linda Colley’s *Britons*. Competition with France is certainly part of this story, especially in the potential kinship of Shakespeare’s formal freedoms with English natural-law theories of liberty as against the rule-bound character of French drama, associated more with a political culture dominated by a centralized, monarchical state. But it would be just as plausible to see the Shakespeare–Racine opposition more as a debate about the poetics of dramatic art than as totemic items in an agon of nations—that is, as a debate concerned with what makes for successful drama, rather than for a distinctively national one. For ‘Shakespeare’ was not a uniquely English affair. The national-rivalry scenario might, once again, make sense of the appropriation of Shakespeare in Germany, as part of the struggle against the hegemony of French ‘taste’ which Frederick the Great had sought to impose. But what of the appropriation inside France itself? In turning away from Racine towards Shakespeare (Stendhal’s *Shakespeare et Racine* is its energetic polemical statement), the French Romantics were hardly enlisting in the cause of English literary nationalism against the French variety, on the argument that England was now poised to seize the high ground

in the rivalry of nations. If anything, the French Romantics were themselves fervent literary nationalists, deeply preoccupied with liberating the spirit of French drama from the dead weight of normative 'rules'; but who, in pursuit of that goal, were unafraid to cross the Channel for inspiration and legitimation. They were unafraid to do so because their prime concern was less with defending a national legacy than with refashioning French understanding of what it meant, under certain conditions, to write a good play. This suggests not just a dilution of the 'national' criterion but, equally importantly, a major adjustment of the red-tooth-and-claw competitive model. It might make more sense to speak here of literary 'negotiations', itself of course a diplomatico-commercial term, but with the implication of at least a modicum of cooperative rather than competitive transaction. This would not necessarily mean that the negotiations constitute a cozily eirenic exchange; they may well be fraught with tension and ambivalence.⁵

The implications of this particular case take us well into what is problematic about Casanova's terms and assumptions. It is not just that, even on its own terms, the account fails to address the full range of relevant facts. The real problem is with the terms themselves, above all 'nation' and 'literature', which behave in her text like two twins, mirror-

⁵ 'Negotiation' would carry the minimalist presupposition of some common language in and over which to negotiate, although without in any way papering over the many cognitive misfits and value-clashes that might and do arise in the conduct of negotiations. It would simply mean that what, for a given culture, might be experienced as 'alien conceptions' should not translate as 'the conceptions of aliens', as Bernard Williams has wittily put it. The importance of this thought for Casanova's argument is that it meets head-on one of the more fashionable and extreme types of rivalry theory, namely the so-called incommensurability hypothesis, according to which different cultural systems are mutually unintelligible to one another and thus non-translatable. The most influential contemporary version of this hypothesis has been Jean-François Lyotard's view, in *La Condition postmoderne* and *Le Différend*, that Western *grands récits* have not merely dominated but effectively annihilated alternative narratives by the simple gesture of refusing to recognize their terms. In Lyotard's agon there can be no common ground for discussion, transaction and adjudication, there is simply war between winners and losers. Casanova does not go this far, although there is a certain implicit drift in this direction. But it is not at all clear that a scenario of this type will help us make much sense of *Wellliteratur*. If, as is the case, the latter involves 'unequal' access to cultural resources, this notion is coherent only if we presume the existence of something in common, equal access to which can be imagined as in principle possible or desirable.

images of each other, locking the argument into a self-confirming circle. While they yield interesting questions, their effective hypostasis produces answers that are at best incomplete, at worst badly skewed. Nation in fact functions here as a kind of *a priori*. At one point she maintains that ‘national literary and linguistic capital is a form of primary definition, *a priori* and almost inescapable, for the writer’, an assumption whereby conclusions are already contained in premises, thus guaranteeing in advance the outcomes the argument seeks to secure. In respect of what can go wrong with an exclusive reliance on the category of ‘nation’, perhaps we can do no better than pause briefly over a concept that recurs often in Casanova’s text, that of ‘small literatures’. This is famously associated with an essay by Kafka, which in Casanova’s book is cited dozens of times and which, moreover, gets a section all to itself (although to call it an ‘essay’ is already to beg questions: it is more a prose poem, a kind of playful caprice; a generic consideration that has some bearing on the substantive issues it throws up).

Writing back

Small literatures correspond more or less to what, in Casanova’s terms, are the excluded or marginalized members of the national–international literary system (in Kafka’s case, Czech and Yiddish). Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari made Kafka’s essay an early version of the script in which the Empire-writes-back, by the simple expedient of converting the concept of ‘small literature’ into that of ‘minority literature’, which is then attributed explosive ‘revolutionary’ potential. Happily, Casanova junks the Deleuzian assimilation of small to minority as a category-mistake, producing an image of Kafka as a prophetic revolutionary quite at odds with his real preoccupations. On the other hand, she defines these preoccupations entirely in terms of nation and nationalism. Kafka’s interest in Czech and Yiddish literature has to do with the ways in which ‘small’ nations form a national literary identity. She even goes so far as to claim that ‘for Kafka, in his own terms, nationalism is one of the great political convictions’. Kafka does indeed speak of the role of small literatures in forging national ‘solidarity’ and the like early in his essay, but—this is why its generic form as a kind of poetic arabesque is so important—the terms of small-nation ethnic nationalism are, towards the close of his enigmatic text, despatched into another space altogether, dominated by a playful tone of gaiety

and wit, as if 'nationalism' were now a kind of burlesque 'topic' rather than the ground of an ardent political commitment.

The form is that of a literary *performance*, a high-spirited dance around the edges of the serious and the non-serious, in which it is difficult to tell what is being advocated, if indeed anything at all, bearing in mind what happens to the notion of 'advocacy' and the discourse of 'rights' in Kafka's own fictions. (Casanova herself occasionally speaks the language of rights—the 'right' of small literatures to exist—as if literary history could be imagined as a kind of international court at The Hague.) Small literatures do not 'compete' with large ones, in the form of affirming ethnic 'difference' against a potentially obliterating Other. A small literature's writers may compete with each other, in a spirit of 'liveliness', since one of its defining features for Kafka is the lack of grand canonical figures whose authority might silence dissenting voices. But this lack also confines them to a backwater, inhabited by 'petty themes' and 'small enthusiasms'. What comes out of this matters to Kafka, but not in the way that Casanova appears to think. One can respect small literatures for their popular-democratic 'liveliness' and 'intimacy' (freed from the strains and anxieties of either high-canonical or extra-territorial competition) but also want to escape them as stiflingly narrow. They are certainly not deployed by Kafka to set forth an agenda or to furnish a 'model', least of all for Kafka's own literary enterprise.

This is crucial. In relation to the Czech context, Deleuze also makes a further move, which is to read Kafka's own fictional writing as an instance of minority literature, specifically as an instantiation of a 'dialect' called literary Prague-German. This is a complete nonsense. Whatever written Prague-German looked like (Deleuze doesn't tell us), Kafka didn't write it. What he wrote was an oddly focused, because simultaneously de- and re-metaphorized, form of High German. Casanova wanders into this minefield, but with a displacement of attention from Prague-German to Yiddish. The result is catastrophic: one can describe

Kafka's entire literary enterprise as a monument to the glory of Yiddish . . . and as an œuvre founded on a desperate recourse [*une pratique désespérée*] to the German language . . . In this sense, one could consider his work as 'translated' in its entirety from a language he was not able to write—Yiddish.

The only thought this description, in which words are unmoored from meaning, can conceivably suggest is that, whatever language Casanova read Kafka in, it was not the original.⁶ She moreover fails to understand that what Kafka is good at is not succumbing to despair but making jokes, albeit poignant ones. An exceptionally good joke is the following extract from a letter to Max Brod, on the ‘impossible’ relation of German–Jewish writers to German (and thus by implication to Yiddish; or rather—not at all the same thing—to Yiddish-German; *mauscheln* as Kafka put it):

They existed among three impossibilities, which I just happen to call linguistic impossibilities . . . These are: the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing German, the impossibility of writing differently. One might also add a fourth impossibility, the impossibility of writing.

This doubled double-bind just about covers all the angles, exhausted with the ghoulish glee of the logical permutations of a Beckett novel. As it happens, Casanova stakes all on this well-known passage, with quite a large bet on the fourth option—thus confusing Kafka’s sense of humour with the statement of a literary programme. It doesn’t tell us much about the prose of *Das Schloss*.⁷

The Irish example

The scenario of underdog nations, battling for a place in a literary sun blocked by the shadow of tyrant languages and literatures, is also her way with another strategic example. Ireland (especially of the Irish Literary Revival centred on the Abbey Theatre and the Gaelic League) is offered as a paradigm case of the rebellion of a small nation against the colonizing dominion of a big one, ‘paradigmatic’ in that it offers, in every detail, a model of ‘subversion’ of the ‘literary order’. This recycling of tendentious legend will not do. There is, of course, a very important national-liberationist dimension to the Irish case; but it is

⁶ Iris Bruce informs me that there exists a Yiddish translation of *The Trial* by Melech Ravitch. Her comment: ‘the translation was very good, very literal and faithful to the original: precisely because he Yiddishized Kafka, he made me see the difference’.

⁷ On the question of Kafka and small literatures, I have benefited greatly from numerous exchanges with Stanley Corngold. See his ‘Kafka and the Dialect of Small Literatures’, *College Literature*, Special Issue: Critical Theory in Post-Communist Cultures, vol. 21, no. 1 (February 1994), 89–101.

neither adequately grasped nor adequately contextualized if it is seen as the only dimension. Irish literature is not and never was positioned historically and culturally in the same way as, say, Polish–Yiddish literature. In the first place, the potentially upbeat narrative of the Revival works only if you leave out what was also darkly regressive about it: the association, for example, of Yeats’s Celtic twilight with his enthusiasm for the Irish Blue Shirts. Secondly, the exclusive insistence on the emancipatory struggles of a small nation hugely distorts the actual facts of Irish (including Anglo-Irish) literary history, from the eighteenth century onwards. In connexion with the Irish ‘paradigm’, Casanova cites Kafka’s idea of small literatures as if the former were an exemplary illustration of the latter. But, it will be recalled, for Kafka one of the defining features of a small literature is that it has no great canonical figures. This could scarcely be maintained in respect of Irish writing. In this regard, perhaps I could cite the somewhat indirect testimony of an extremely well-read Irishman.

I have on my mantelpiece a framed document issued in 1969 by the Inner London Quarter Sessions. It is a notice confirming a sentence of Conditional Discharge in respect of a charge of ‘threatening to murder’. The person whom my father threatened to murder was Georges Bidault of OAS fame, in the form of a letter written while under the influence on the day the London evening newspapers headlined General de Gaulle’s pardon. Addressed and despatched to Mr Georges Bidault, Paris, France, the letter ran as follows: ‘Dear Mr Bidault, if you were in Dublin, three of us would drive up into the Wicklow Mountains and only two of us would come back down. Yours, James Prendergast’. Two days later—the letter having been intercepted by Interpol—my father was arrested by two Special Branch officers and charged with threatening to assassinate a figure in French public life. At the trial, prosecuting counsel took various tacks, one of them—rather oddly in the circumstances—being to suggest that, as a pig-ignorant Irishman, perhaps my father did not have a very secure grip on the finer points of English. His reply, directed to the bench, was memorable: ‘Your Honour, like Dean Swift, Oliver Goldsmith, Edmund Burke, William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw, John Millington Synge, Sean O’Casey, James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, I occasionally have difficulties with the English language’. The beak found this rather droll; case—conditionally—dismissed.

The point of course is that, however it stands to canonical literary production in England during the period in question, this roll-call hardly reflects what Casanova (or, more pertinently, Kafka) understands by 'small' literature. Making sense of this roll-call is a complex business, and no single narrative will do justice to it. Casanova's mono-track account edits out these complexities and, when it reaches the cases of Joyce and Beckett, starts to creak alarmingly. Joyce (including, indeed pre-eminently including the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*) is represented as an anti-English revolutionary. Joyce certainly re-located out of Ireland and the English-speaking world to become a European equivalent of the Wandering Jew and, at one point, asserted that he did not 'write in English'. But to claim that, in *Finnegans Wake* of all texts, Joyce strove to give back to Ireland 'a language that would be its own' will be news to Irish writers and readers and is simply to mis-identify Irish with what Anthony Burgess, characterizing the language of *Finnegans Wake*, aptly called a form of 'Eurish'.

Matters get worse when she turns her attention to Beckett. We still need a satisfactory account of Beckett's relations to Ireland, Irishness and Irishry (though Anthony Cronin had a shot at it in his biography).⁸ Casanova seems to believe that this is best understood by seeing Beckett's work as representing 'a completion of the constituting of Irish literary space and of its process of emancipation'. To this end she is compelled to maintain that Beckett switched to French in order to escape the colonizing grip of English on Irish letters (where 'Irish', linguistically speaking, would now have to mean Gaelic). This does not stand up in the face of what little we know about the matter. Indeed, such a motive would have made little coherent ideological sense, since it was a switch to what was itself, from the point of view of, say, North Africa, an 'imperial' language. In so far as we can have any clear view of his motives, it would seem that Beckett took up French not to escape Anglo-Irish but to escape the word-spinning seductions of James Joyce. Beckett's emancipation is not about the emancipation of 'Irish literary space'; it is about the emancipation of Samuel Beckett.⁹

⁸ *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist*, London 1996.

⁹ I concede, however, that this is perhaps over-dogmatic; and certainly would not wish it to be taken as implying an individualist model of literary history (a more amiable version of Bloom's anxiety of influence). It may well be that it was only in his French-speaking fictional world that Beckett could manage and absorb

The examples of Joyce and Beckett also raise another set of questions, which return us to the category of the 'ex-centric' in the experience of decolonization. This, we have already seen, is cast as a heroic story. It is also, curiously, sometimes cast as a teleological one, whereby what has happened had to happen, as a sort of progress-fable in high Enlightenment mode. Those of us of more sceptical dispositions might want at this point to recall Raymond Williams's acid remarks in *The Politics of Modernism* about the 'ratified' version of modernism and the avant-garde as a selective version, marketed at the expense of other tendencies. We do not have to share Williams's scarcely veiled hostility to the City of Exiles and Emigrés (he is thinking of New York rather than Paris) and his preference for more 'settled', local cultures. There is here a whiff of Zhdanovite prejudice against 'deracinated' cosmopolitans, but there is also a corrective to the thickly upholstered jet-setting comfort in which metropolitan postcolonial discourse has recently tended to get about. More importantly, this deheroicizing view of the footloose avant-garde may encourage a strictly analytical distinction of some note and implication. What Casanova invests in the idea of Paris, as historic centre of the international literary order, is indissociable from positing it as a capital city; this is vital by virtue of the link tying capital to nation. But perhaps we might want to think of the Paris of the twentieth-century avant-garde and then, later, the postcolonial diaspora, more as a metropolis, in terms of the formal distinctions sketched by Anne Querrien in 'The Metropolis and the Capital'. Here, the capital is a political and cultural 'centre', with the power and the authority to dominate a wider 'territory', to keep in place a 'social hierarchy' and to 'subjugate a population . . . to a common heritage'. A metropolis, on the other hand, 'is not a centre and has no centre'; it 'has no identity to preserve'. It 'begins with the slightest desire to exchange', is 'made up of networks', puts 'an incongruous mix of beings into circulation' and is 'the place where migrants find their socially predetermined destination'.¹⁰

Twentieth-century Paris is, of course, neither exclusively one or the other, but is perhaps best seen as straddling both: a political capital,

'Ireland'. Furthermore, if I have concentrated on these two examples, it is partly because they loom very large in Casanova's book; partly because they are cases with which I have some familiarity. What 'small literatures' look like once one quits the Prague–Dublin axis would be for others to say (for example, the Japan–Korea relation, which Casanova briefly mentions but does not discuss at great length).

¹⁰ *Zone*, 1/2, 1986.

tioned to the nation; a cultural metropolis, relatively detached from it—an abstract space of exchange-relations, in which national identities from both home and abroad dissolve in the operations of the literary marketplace. While this has involved immensely painful struggles for some (though by no means all) individual writers, as a social reality it is not a heroic phenomenon. Moreover, it unravels the tightly knotted nation–market interdependency, which plays such a large part in Casanova’s whole argument, by suggesting that, under these conditions, nation and market start to tug apart. Admittedly, in one chapter she distinguishes between literary internationalization and commercial globalization; but even here, still insists on referring to Paris as a ‘capital’.

Forms of writing

The lock on the argument engineered by the *a priori* category of the nation is further tightened by what goes unexamined in the other key term of her text: the meaning and reference of the word ‘literature’. I have already pointed out that the idea of world literature cannot practically be taken to refer to all the verbal arts around the globe (amongst other things, it excludes cultures whose only or main form of self-expression is oral recitation unless and until they become transmissible through transcription). ‘Literature’ in this context is tied to print-based literacy and, as Benedict Anderson has shown, is indeed directly linked to the creation of nation-states. But even within this more limited framework, it does not follow that ‘literature’ has always signified what Casanova effectively takes it to mean. In *La République mondiale des lettres* it is relentlessly absorbed into the equation with imaginative writing but—remarkably, in a book that stresses the historicity of literature—without any apparent awareness that, on a world-historical view, the equation is itself a very recent invention. A chapter headed ‘*L’invention de la littérature*’ is about many things, but one thing it is not about is the invention of ‘literature’ in the sense that matters here.

That the restricted meaning in fact became the dominant one, largely through a process of specialization within European literary history, would of course fit neatly into one dimension of Casanova’s self-imposed brief; but only if explicitly clarified as a historical phenomenon in its own right, in place of an approach which takes for granted the sense of ‘literature’ as denoting essentially poems, plays and novels. One way it

might have done would be through a contrast with the term of her title, not '*littérature*' but '*lettres*', whose semantic history, while not identical to that of its equivalent English term 'letters', overlaps with the early and much broader humanist meaning of 'literature' as forms of writing and reading that make for polite learning. There is an anthropological as well as historical dimension to this issue. What in the West is called 'literature', in India is called *kavya*, and in China *wen*; though cognate terms in some respects, they clearly are not identical. Thus, the suggestion that twentieth-century decolonization is the moment of liberation for 'all the countries hitherto excluded from the very idea of literature proper (in Africa, in India, in Asia)' presumes a view of what is 'proper' to literature that works only if it excludes vast swathes of Indian and Chinese writing, which sit quite comfortably within the systems of *kavya* and *wen*. Casanova rails, here and there, against ethnocentrism; but her description of the international literary system depends on a system of categories that is ethnocentric itself.

A second difficulty stems from the fact that Casanova shuffles between using the term 'literature' both with and without quotation marks, in the latter case as if she were talking of the actual article, as distinct from particular ideological constructions of it. Indeed, she insists that as a practice literature possesses a certain specificity, even an autonomy—although, in refusing to sever literary practice from the pressures of a wider history, she quite rightly repudiates that mystified version of 'autonomy' which hives literature off into the self-sealing category of the 'aesthetic'. The problem however is that, from her end of the autonomist position, she supplies no guidance whatsoever as to what this specificity is supposed to look like; there is no literary *analysis*. What we are given are historically situated perceptions of authors, traditions and writings (those produced by literary histories, polemical essays, publicity machines) but no sense of what makes a literary text a text. Perceptions are hugely variable. There are many perceptions, and corresponding uses, of, say, Shakespeare, other than those congenial to readers of nationalist persuasions. What we need is an account of how Shakespeare's actual practice of writing meshes with the image of Shakespeare directly relevant to her argument (the Shakespeare of the eighteenth century); that is, we need Shakespeare as well as 'Shakespeare'.¹¹ Perceptions are a perfectly legiti-

¹¹ See Graham Bradshaw's *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* (Ithaca, NY 1993) for a beautiful elucidation of this point.

mate object of inquiry; but without some scrutiny of the texts onto which they are projected, there can be no justification for taking the term 'literature' out of quotation marks.

This is not a demand that the project of world-literary history make room for the techniques of close reading—although one can happily fantasize that potentially fertile if unwieldy marriage; it might yield some acquaintance with, for example, the textures of Kafka's prose. The lack of any literary-analytical perspective, however, does have major adverse knock-on effects for the validity of Casanova's more general arguments. One such is that the relatively frozen, homogenized entity 'literature' entails a radical neglect of important generic discriminations—which, once restored to their rightful place, threaten to drive a coach and horses through her decisive and unbreakable anchorage of literature to nation and inter-nation rivalry. The genre that gives the best results from her point of view is the novel—as at once buoyantly migratory and yet the source of such acutely contentious cultural politics. Franco Moretti has adapted world-systems theory to an account of the 'world' travels of the novel genre, arguing that tensions often arise from the attempt to graft the abstract, formal schemes of the Western novel onto the particularity of indigenous social experience, although in terms that reveal a high degree of variability: in some cases the tensions are easily managed, in others they remain severe. An extreme case, which might well take Moretti's fancy, is the novel *Giambatista Viko* by the Zairean writer Mbwil a Mpaang Ngal, in which the narrator is put on trial by the village elders for having forsaken oral, storytelling culture in favour of the written forms of Western narrative. Moretti's conclusion is very like Casanova's competitive model: the novel is the generic site of a 'struggle for symbolic hegemony' (although elsewhere in Moretti's work relations of competition are posed in neo-Darwinian rather than Bourdieuesque terms).

But if the novel can be seen as heavily freighted with the political, this is not patently the case with other literary genres. Drama seems to travel less anxiously. Wole Soyinka's *Bacchae* is in many ways a re-write of Euripides; but less as a combative take on ancient Greek tragedy (in respect of his other play, *Death and the Horseman*, he has explicitly repudiated the fashionable postcolonial view that it is about the 'clash of cultures') than as a successfully negotiated adaptation to indigenous material—perhaps because, by virtue of its formal conventions, drama

lends itself more readily to the resources of orality and ritual.¹² How might the national-competitive construct work with lyric poetry? Or what of that older genre within the institution of European letters, namely, letters, in the epistolary sense? The map of centre and periphery would apply here in terms of the division between literate and illiterate, but there is no evidence whatsoever that it involved rivalries between cultures and nations. Within the practice of the genre itself, it seems not to have occurred to anyone that there was a distinctively ‘Dutch’ or ‘French’ or ‘English’ way of composing a letter. One of the greatest letter-writers of them all, Mme de Sévigné, could at a stretch be made to serve the designs of French literary-imperial ambitions; but her most intelligent admirer, Marcel Proust—whose spirit Walter Benjamin described as ‘intransigently French’—never saw it this way at all.

The devil, I have said, is in the detail. This should not be confused with a nominalist position that dissolves all grand perspectives into the messy play of particulars. It is rather that a single, generalizing description misses too much and is destined to do so, if it is offered as *the* description. What is needed is a proliferation of competing (sic) but also mutually nuancing predicates, description that is thick rather than thin—though of course this is all too easily said; just how thickly it can be spun by any mortal must remain almost beyond the powers of our imagining, let alone our executive capacities.

¹² Discussing the *Bacchae*, Soyinka has spoken of ‘the capability of the drama (or ritual) of the gods to travel as aesthetically and passionately as the gods themselves’ (*Myth, Literature and the African World*, Cambridge 1978, p. 7). He also makes the devastating point that the capability of literary forms to travel cross-culturally is not always matched by corresponding recognitions of that fact. His book originally consisted of a series of lectures given at Cambridge University, of which he writes: ‘The lectures were duly given, but they took place entirely in the Department of Social Anthropology. Casual probing after it was all over indicated that the Department of English (or perhaps some key individual) did not believe in any such mythical beast as “African Literature”.’ If we put these two moments from Soyinka’s text together, we have a prime case of what literary ‘negotiations’ can look like on the ground.