

MORE CONJECTURES

IN THE PAST YEAR OR SO, several articles have addressed the issues raised in 'Conjectures on World Literature': Christopher Prendergast, Francesca Orsini, Efraín Kristal and Jonathan Arac in *New Left Review*, Emily Apter and Jale Parla elsewhere.¹ My thanks to all of them; and as I obviously cannot respond to every point in detail, I will focus here on the three main areas of disagreement among us: the (questionable) paradigmatic status of the novel; the relationship between core and periphery, and its consequences for literary form; and the nature of comparative analysis.

I

One must begin somewhere, and 'Conjectures' tried to sketch how the literary world-system works by focusing on the rise of the modern novel: a phenomenon which is easy to isolate, has been studied all the world over, and thus lends itself well to comparative work. I also added that the novel was 'an example, not a model; and of course my example, based on the field I know (elsewhere, things may be very different)'. Elsewhere things are different indeed: 'If the novel can be seen as heavily freighted with the political, this is not patently the case for other literary genres. Drama seems to travel less anxiously . . . How might the . . . construct work with lyric poetry?', asks Prendergast; and Kristal: 'Why doesn't poetry follow the laws of the novel?'.²

It doesn't? I wonder. What about Petrarchism? Propelled by its formalized lyrical conventions, Petrarchism spread to (at least) Spain, Portugal, France, England, Wales, the Low Countries, the German territories, Poland, Scandinavia, Dalmatia (and, according to Roland Greene, the New World). As for its depth and duration, I am sceptical about the

old Italian claim that by the end of the sixteenth century over two hundred *thousand* sonnets had been written in Europe in imitation of Petrarch; still, the main disagreement seems to be, not on the enormity of the facts, but on the enormity of their enormity—ranging from a century (Navarrete, Fucilla), to two (Manero Sorolla, Kennedy), three (Hoffmeister, Kristal himself), or five (Greene). Compared to the wave-like diffusion of this '*lingua franca* for love poets', as Hoffmeister calls it, western novelistic 'realism' looks like a rather ephemeral vogue.³

Other things being equal, anyway, I would imagine literary movements to depend on three broad variables—a genre's potential market, its overall formalization and its use of language—and to range from the rapid wave-like diffusion of forms with a large market, rigid formulas and simplified style (say, adventure novels), to the relative stasis of those characterized by a small market, deliberate singularity and linguistic density (say, experimental poetry). Within this matrix, novels would be representative, not of the *entire* system, but of its most mobile strata, and by concentrating only on them we would probably overstate the mobility

¹ 'Conjectures on World Literature', NLR 1; Christopher Prendergast, 'Negotiating World Literature', NLR 8; Francesca Orsini, 'Maps of Indian Writing', NLR 13; Efraim Kristal, "'Considering Coldly . . .': A Response to Franco Moretti", NLR 15; Jonathan Arac, 'Anglo-Globalism?' NLR 16; Emily Apter, 'Global *Translatio*: The "Invention" of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933', *Critical Inquiry*, 29, 2003; Jale Parla's essay ('The object of comparison') will be published in a special issue of *Comparative Literature Studies* edited by Djelal Kadir in January 2004.

² 'Conjectures', p. 58; 'Negotiating World Literature', pp. 120–1; "'Considering Coldly . . .'", p. 62. Orsini makes a similar point for Indian literature: 'Moretti's novel-based theses would seem to have little application to the Subcontinent, where the major nineteenth and twentieth-century forms have been poetry, drama and the short story, whose evolution may show quite different patterns of change': 'Maps', p. 79.

³ See Antero Meozzi, *Il petrarchismo europeo (secolo xvi)*, Pisa 1934; Leonard Forster, *The Icy Fire: Five studies in European Petrarchism*, Cambridge 1969; Joseph Fucilla, *Estudios sobre el petrarquismo en España*, Madrid 1960; Ignacio Navarrete, *Orphans of Petrarch*, California 1994; William Kennedy, *Authorizing Petrarch*, Ithaca 1994; Maria Pilar Manero Sorolla, *Introducción al estudio del petrarquismo en España*, Barcelona 1987; Gerhart Hoffmeister, *Petrarkistische Lyrik*, Stuttgart 1973; Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence*, Princeton 1991. Kristal's implicit acknowledgement of the hegemony of Petrarchism over European and Latin American poetry comes where he writes that 'the lyrical conventions of modern Spanish poetry were developed in the 16th century by Boscán and Garcilaso de la Vega . . . The first signs of a reaction against the strictest conventions of Spanish prosody did not take place in Spain but in Spanish America in the 1830s': "'Considering Coldly . . .'", p. 64.

of world literature. If ‘Conjectures’ erred in that direction it was a mistake, easily corrected as we learn more about the international diffusion of drama, poetry and so on (here, Donald Sassoon’s current work on cultural markets will be invaluable).⁴ Truth be told, I would be very disappointed if all of literature turned out to ‘follow the laws of the novel’: that a single explanation may work *everywhere* is both very implausible and extraordinarily boring. But before indulging in speculations at a more abstract level, we must learn to share the significant facts of literary history across our specialized niches. Without collective work, world literature will always remain a mirage.

II

Is world-system theory, with its strong emphasis on a rigid international division of labour, a good model for the study of world literature? On this, the strongest objection comes from Kristal: ‘I am arguing, however, in favour of a view of world literature’, he writes, ‘in which the West does not have a monopoly over the creation of forms that count; in which themes and forms can move in several directions—from the centre to the periphery, from the periphery to the centre, from one periphery to another, while some original forms of consequence may not move much at all’.⁵

Yes, forms *can* move in several directions. But *do* they? This is the point, and a theory of literary history should reflect on the constraints on their movements, and the reasons behind them. What I know about European novels, for instance, suggests that hardly any forms ‘of consequence’ don’t move at all; that movement from one periphery to another (without passing through the centre) is almost unheard of;⁶ that movement from the periphery to the centre is less rare, but still quite unusual,

⁴ See, for a preliminary account, ‘On Cultural Markets’, NLR 17.

⁵ “‘Considering Coldly . . .’”, pp. 73–4.

⁶ I mean here the movement between peripheral cultures which do not belong to the same ‘region’: from, say, Norway to Portugal (or vice versa), not from Norway to Iceland or Sweden, or from Colombia to Guatemala and Peru. Sub-systems made relatively homogeneous by language, religion or politics—of which Latin America is the most interesting and powerful instance—are a great field for comparative study, and may add interesting complications to the larger picture (like Darío’s modernism, evoked by Kristal).

while that from the centre to the periphery is by far the most frequent.⁷ Do these facts imply that the West has ‘a monopoly over the creation of the forms that count’? Of course not.⁸ Cultures from the centre have more resources to pour into innovation (literary and otherwise), and are thus more likely to produce it: but a monopoly over creation is a theological attribute, not an historical judgment.⁹ The model proposed in

⁷ The reason why literary products flow from the centre to the periphery is spelt out by Even-Zohar in his work on polysystems, extensively quoted at the beginning of ‘Conjectures’: peripheral (or, as he calls them, ‘weak’) literatures ‘often do not develop the same full range of literary activities . . . observable in adjacent larger literatures (which in consequence may create a feeling that they are indispensable)’; ‘a weak . . . system is unable to function by confining itself to its home repertoire only’, and the ensuing lack ‘may be filled, wholly or partly, by translated literature’. Literary weakness, Even-Zohar goes on, ‘does not necessarily result from political or economic weakness, although rather often it seems to be correlated with material conditions’; as a consequence, ‘since peripheral literatures in the Western hemisphere tend more often than not to be identical with literatures of smaller nations, as unpalatable as this idea may seem to us, we have no choice but to admit that within a group of relatable national literatures, such as the literatures of Europe, hierarchical relations have been established since the very beginnings of these literatures. Within this (macro-)polysystem some literatures have taken peripheral positions, which is only to say that they were often modelled to a large extent upon an exterior literature.’ Itamar Even-Zohar, ‘Polysystem Studies’, in *Poetics Today*, spring 1990, pp. 47, 81, 80, 48.

⁸ Nor does it have a monopoly over criticism that counts. Of the twenty critics on whose work the argument of ‘Conjectures’ rests, writes Arac, ‘one is quoted in Spanish, one in Italian, and eighteen in English’; so, ‘the impressive diversity of surveying some twenty national literatures diminishes into little more than one single means by which they may be known. English in culture, like the dollar in economics, serves as the medium through which knowledge may be translated from the local to the global’: ‘Anglo-Globalism?’, p. 40. True, eighteen critics are quoted in English. But as far as I know only four or five are from the country of the dollar, while the others belong to a dozen different cultures. Is this less significant than the language they use? I doubt it. Sure, global English may end up impoverishing our thinking, as American films do. But for now, the rapid wide public exchanges it makes possible far exceed its potential dangers. Parla puts it well: ‘To unmask the hegemony [of imperialism] is an intellectual task. It does not harm to know English as one sets out for the task.’

⁹ After all, my last two books end on the formal revolutions of Russian and Latin American narrative—a point also made (not ‘conceded’, as Kristal puts it, suggesting reluctance on my part) in an article on European literature (‘an importer of those formal novelties that it is no longer capable of producing’), another one on Hollywood exports (‘a counter-force at work within the world literary system’) and in ‘Conjectures’ itself. See ‘Modern European Literature: A Geographical Sketch’, NLR 1/206, July–August 1994, p. 109; ‘Planet Hollywood’, NLR 9, May–June 2001, p. 101.

'Conjectures' does not reserve invention to a few cultures and deny it to the others: it specifies *the conditions under which it is more likely to occur*, and the forms it may take. Theories will never abolish inequality: they can only hope to explain it.

III

Kristal also objects to what he calls the 'postulate of a general homology between the inequalities of the world economic and literary systems': in other words, 'the assumption that literary and economic relationships run parallel may work in some cases, but not in others'.¹⁰ Even-Zohar's argument is a partial response to the objection; but there is another sense in which Kristal is right, and the simplifying euphoria of an article originally conceived as a 30-minute talk is seriously misleading. By reducing the literary world-system to core and periphery, I erased from the picture the transitional area (the semi-periphery) where cultures move in and out of the core; as a consequence, I also understated the fact that in many (and perhaps most) instances, material and intellectual hegemony are indeed very close, but not quite identical.

Let me give some examples. In the 18th and 19th centuries, the long struggle for hegemony between Britain and France ended with Britain's victory on all fronts—except one: in the world of narrative, the verdict was reversed, and French novels were both more successful and formally more significant than British ones. Elsewhere I have tried to explain the reasons for the morphological supremacy of German tragedy from the mid-eighteenth century on; or the key role of semi-peripheral realities in the production of modern epic forms. Petrarchism, which reached its international zenith when its wealthy area of origin had already catastrophically declined (like those stars which are still shining long after their death), is a particularly spooky instance of this state of affairs.

All these examples (and more) have two features in common. First, they arise from cultures which are close to, or inside the core of the

'Conjectures' pointed out that 'in those rare instances when the impossible programme succeeds, we have genuine formal revolutions' (p. 59, footnote 9), and that 'in a few lucky cases, the structural weakness may turn into a strength, as in Schwarz's interpretation of Machado' (p. 66, footnote 29).

¹⁰ "Considering Coldly . . .", pp. 69, 73.

system—but are not hegemonic in the economic sphere. France may be the paradigm here, as if being an eternal second in the political and economic arena encouraged investment in culture (as in its feverish post-Napoleonic creativity, compared to the postprandial somnolence of the victorious Victorians). A—limited—discrepancy between material and literary hegemony does therefore exist: wider in the case of innovation *per se* (which does not require a powerful apparatus of production and distribution), and narrower, or absent, in the case of diffusion (which does).¹¹ Yet, and this is the second feature in common, all these examples confirm the inequality of the world literary system: an inequality which does not coincide with economic inequality, true, and allows some mobility—but a mobility *internal* to the unequal system, not alternative to it. At times, even the dialectic between semi-periphery and core may actually widen the overall gap (as in the instances mentioned in footnote 11, or when Hollywood quickly ‘remakes’ successful foreign films, effectively strengthening its own position). At any rate, this is clearly another field where progress will only be possible through the good coordination of specific local knowledge.

IV

The central morphological point of ‘Conjectures’ was the contrast between the rise of the novel in the core as an ‘autonomous development’, and the rise in the periphery as a ‘compromise’ between a

¹¹ The fact that innovations may arise in the semi-periphery, but then be captured and diffused by the core of the core, emerges from several studies on the early history of the novel (by Armstrong, Resina, Trumpener and others: all written in total independence from world-system theory), which have pointed out how often the culture industry of London and Paris discovers a foreign form, introduces a few improvements, and then retails it as its own throughout Europe (ending in the masterstroke of the ‘English’ novelist Walter Scott). As the picaresque declines in its native country, *Gil Blas* and *Moll Flanders* and *Marianne and Tom Jones* spread it all over Europe; epistolary novels, first written in Spain and Italy, become a continental craze thanks to Montesquieu and Richardson (and then Goethe); American ‘captivity narratives’ acquire international currency through *Clarissa* and the Gothic; the Italian ‘melodramatic imagination’ conquers the world through Parisian *feuilletons*; the German *Bildungsroman* is intercepted by Stendhal, Balzac, Dickens, Brontë, Flaubert, Eliot . . . This is of course not the only path of literary innovation, perhaps not even the main one; but the mechanism is certainly there—half swindle, half international division of labour—and has an interesting similarity to larger economic constraints.

Western influence and local materials. As Parla and Arac point out, however, early English novels were written, in Fielding's words, 'after the manner of Cervantes' (or of someone else), thus making clear that a compromise between local and foreign forms occurred there as well.¹² And if this was the case, then there was no 'autonomous development' in western Europe, and the idea that forms have, so to speak, *a different history* at the core and at the periphery crumbles. The world-system model may be useful at other levels, but has no explanatory power at the level of form.

Here things are easy: Parla and Arac are right—and I should have known better. After all, the thesis that literary form is *always* a compromise between opposite forces has been a Leitmotiv of my intellectual formation, from Francesco Orlando's Freudian aesthetics to Gould's 'Panda principle', or Lukács' conception of realism. How on earth could I 'forget' all this? In all likelihood, because the core/periphery opposition made me look (or wish . . .) for a parallel morphological pattern, which I then couched in the wrong conceptual terms.¹³

So let me try again. 'Probably all systems known to us have emerged and developed with interference playing a prominent role', writes Even-Zohar: 'there is not one single literature which did not emerge through interference with a more established literature: and no literature could manage without interference at one time or another during its history'.¹⁴ No literature without interference . . . hence, also, no literature without compromises between the local and the foreign. But does this mean that all types of interference and compromise *are the same*? Of course not: the picaresque, captivity narratives, even the *Bildungsroman* could not exert the same pressure over French or British novelists that the historical novel or the *mystères* exerted over European and Latin American writers: and we should find a way to express this difference. To recognize when a

¹² 'Anglo-Globalism?', p. 38.

¹³ This seems a good illustration of the 'Kuhnian' point that theoretical expectations will shape facts according to your wishes—and an even better illustration of the 'Popperian' point that facts (usually gathered by those who disagree with you) will be finally stronger.

¹⁴ 'Polysystem Studies', p. 59. A page later, in a footnote, Even-Zohar adds: 'This is true of almost all literatures of the Western hemisphere. As for the Eastern hemisphere, admittedly, Chinese is still a riddle as regards its emergence and early development.'

compromise occurs as it were *under duress*, and is thus likely to produce more unstable and dissonant results—what Zhao calls the ‘uneasiness’ of the late Qing narrator.

The key point, here, is this: if there is a strong, systematic constraint exerted by some literatures over the others (and we all seem to agree that there is),¹⁵ then we should be able to recognize its effects *within literary form itself*: because forms are indeed, in Schwarz’s words, ‘the abstract of specific social relationships’. In ‘Conjectures’, the diagram of forces was embodied in the sharp qualitative opposition of ‘autonomous developments’ and ‘compromises’; but as that solution has been falsified, we must try something else. And, yes, ‘measuring’ the extent of foreign pressure on a text, or its structural instability, or a narrator’s uneasiness, will be complicated, at times even unfeasible. But a diagram of symbolic power is an ambitious goal, and it makes sense that it would be hard to achieve.

V

Two areas for future discussion emerge from all this. The first concerns the type of knowledge literary history should pursue. ‘No science, no laws’ is Arac’s crisp description of Auerbach’s project; and there are similar hints in other articles too. This is of course the old question of whether the proper object of historical disciplines are individual cases or abstract models; and as I will argue at extravagant length for the latter in a series of forthcoming articles, here I will simply say that we have a lot to learn from the methods of the social and of the natural sciences. Will we then find ourselves, in Apter’s words, ‘in a city of bits, where micro and macro literary units are awash in a global system with no obvious sorting device’? I hope so . . . it would be a very interesting universe.

¹⁵ Except Orsini: ‘Implicit in [Casanova’s] view—explicit in Moretti’s—is the traditional assumption of a “source” language, or culture—invariably carrying an aura of authenticity—and a “target” one, seen as in some way imitative. In place of this, Lydia Liu much more usefully proposed the concept of “guest” and “host” languages, to focus attention on the translanguing practice through which the hosts may appropriate concepts and forms . . . Cultural influence becomes a study of appropriation, rather than of centres and peripheries’: ‘Maps’, pp. 81–2. The culture industry as a ‘guest’ invited by a ‘host’ who ‘appropriates’ its forms . . . Are these concepts—or daydreams?’

So, let's start looking for good sorting devices. 'Formalism without close reading', Arac calls the project of 'Conjectures', and I can't think of a better definition. Hopefully, it will also be a formalism where the 'details' so dear to him and to Prendergast will be highlighted, not erased by models and 'schemas'.¹⁶

Finally, politics. Several articles mention the political pressure behind Auerbach's *Mimesis*, or Casanova's *République mondiale des lettres*. To them I would add Lukács's two versions of comparative literature: the one which crystallized around World War I, when *The Theory of the Novel*, and its (never completed) companion study on Dostoevsky mused on whether a world beyond capitalism could even still be imagined; and the one which took shape in the Thirties, as a long meditation on the opposite political significance of German and French literature (with Russia again in the background). Lukács' spatio-temporal horizon was narrow (the nineteenth century, and three European literatures, plus Cervantes in *The Theory of the Novel* and Scott in *The Historical Novel*); his answers were often opaque, scholastic, philistine—or worse. But his lesson lies in how the articulation of his comparative scenario (western Europe or Russia; Germany or France) is simultaneously an attempt to understand the great political dilemmas of his day. Or in other words: *the way we imagine comparative literature is a mirror of how we see the world*. 'Conjectures' tried to do so against the background of the unprecedented possibility that the entire world may be subject to a single centre of power—and a centre which has long exerted an equally unprecedented symbolic hegemony. In charting an aspect of the pre-history of our present, and sketching some possible outcomes, the article may well have overstated its case, or taken some wrong turns altogether. But the relationship between project and background stands, and I believe it will give significance and seriousness to our work in the future. Early March 2003, when these pages are being written, is in this respect a wonderfully paradoxical moment, when, after twenty years of unchallenged American hegemony, millions of people everywhere in the world have expressed their enormous distance from American politics. As human beings, this is cause to rejoice. As cultural historians, it is cause to reflect.

¹⁶ 'Anglo-Globalism?', pp. 41, 38; 'Global *translatio*', p. 255.