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Heralded Heroes

Keywords
Pascale Casanova, field theory, migrant writers, literary sociology

Abstract
World literature studies is the most open field of all. In principle, it excludes nothing and no one. Things become interesting, however, when certain heroes emerge, or to use a metaphor employed by Pascale Casanova, when the figure in the carpet becomes visible. In this article, I will discuss two major influences on her work which gave it a very distinctive position and generated new challenges. The adaptation of the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu in Casanova’s work has proved to be highly interesting, while also probing to what extent a theory developed to describe a predominantly national frame of reference could be transferred to the international domain. Casanova’s return to the question of the nation in her last work underlines the challenge of applying field theory in a world literature context. Casanova’s two monographs devoted to a single author, Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka, respectively, are symptomatic for a particular kind of author in her critical work: the writer working from the semi-periphery in a way that makes a deep impact in the center. A logical development of this interest would be to connect it to postcolonial and migrant writers, which for various reasons did not happen; yet, her descriptions of the condition of the writer between cultures are of high relevance for this emerging field in world literature studies.

1. Introduction
Reading Pascale Casanova’s *La République mondiale des lettres (The World Republic of Letters)* in the early 2000s came with a feeling of engaging with one of the first ambitious works in literary criticism that took hold of a new era of globalization. I had been reading Pierre Bourdieu in the past years, not least *Les Règles de l’art (The Rules of Art)*, and while admiring his epistemological ambitions and the scope of his studies, it was also obvious that literary studies was not his core field. As much as one could envy the work gone into making a map of Flaubert’s Paris, there was something less satisfying about the readings of literary texts and the understanding of these in a larger context rife with domain-specific knowledge. Casanova’s work came as a shining example of how one could transpose the central aspects of a strong theory from another field and use it in a distinctive and independent way. Casanova went places where Bourdieu could not be expected to go, and it was fortunate that there was a scholar who could pick up that field-specific baton.

In the same years the renewed interest in world literature took off. Casanova was somewhat involuntarily dragged into this field, and she explicitly makes that clear in the English translation of *La République mondiale des lettres* that she was not a world literature scholar (xii). Yet, with the strong ambition of chronicling the development of the international literary field in an age of globalization, it was not hard to justify placing her work in a trio of scholars who in a very Bourdieu-like manner had taken different positions in that subfield of literary studies. As I wrote in my 2008 book *Mapping World Literature*, Casanova had different literary heroes and a different analytical approach than Franco Moretti and David Damrosch, whose “Conjectures on World Literature” and *What Is World Literature?* came to serve as other beacons in the reconstruction of world literature studies (20).

While all three scholars have covered a lot of ground, it was certainly possible to observe preferences. Where Damrosch often brings attention to the unlikely connection between works,
often something canonical and something more marginal, Moretti’s interest in world literature takes place at the level of genre, not least the novel’s ability to enter new literary cultures and transform them. In this respect, Casanova’s hero writers came from the semi-periphery to a larger literature before becoming widely recognized. Casanova’s two author-centered monographies on Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka are almost overly exemplary of this rare kind of writer who is culturally marginalized in the language that he or she writes, but nevertheless is able to produce a body of work so strong that it changes the field of literature.

In terms of methods, the ambitions of understanding larger patterns took Moretti to computational literary studies, but also out of a world literature context, as his Stanford Literature Lab focused on contributing to the groundwork of formalizing questions that could not have been answered without the use of digital tools. Damrosch’s focus has been more pluralistic with an emphasis on reformulating the conditions of what it means to do comparative literature, first and foremost by arguing for focusing on comparison among works and authors rather than literary traditions, an argument that is supported by the importance of international recognition and the role translation plays in this. Casanova’s approach was on the one hand firmly rooted in the field theory of Bourdieu, but her work is also very much devoted to the field of criticism whose opinions and valuations shape the literary field in a particular way. Contrary to this, Damrosch opted more for firsthand reading of texts, while Moretti, a very capable close reader, emphasized the need to create distance in order to gain insight into the large, impossible field of world literature.

In this article, I will first consider Casanova’s use of Bourdieu, before arguing that new methods of and data for studying the literary field have created a reflected framework as relevant as ever. Following that, I suggest that Casanova’s fascination with Beckett, Kafka, and other writers coming from the semi-periphery provides a valuable background for understanding the
importance of contemporary migrant and two-cultured authors, before briefly considering in conclusion how the continued economic growth globally takes part in reshaping the literary world map.

2. Cracks in the expanded field?

When re-reading *The World Republic of Letters*, it is striking how little explicit reference there is to Bourdieu’s work, given that his work is very explicitly brought forward at the beginning of the book as a main inspiration for the analytical approach. Bourdieu’s thinking, however, is everywhere in the book. Casanova seeks out poles and positions that constitute fields, she is very aware of how the pursuit of profit and artistic freedom influences the producers of art, and she has a special awareness of those authors who transform the field.

Casanova uses Bourdieu’s theory to make two grand claims about the international literary system: that it has some autonomy and operates with a logic of its own, and that it is a field that can be analyzed much in the same way as Bourdieu analyzes, for example, the French literary and art fields. While Casanova’s writing to a large degree is oriented towards specific analyses of the literary field without dwelling too much on making a new theory, there is still cause to question some of the assumptions that come with these suggestions for a model of the literary system.

The primary concern about using the concept of field in an expanded sense is whether it makes sense to talk about the global community as a field. Bourdieu’s empirical work was created in France at a time when mass media were scarcer and more centralized than today. France is also a nation with a long history of centralizing power, with little counterweight to Paris when it comes to important political and cultural institutions. One could question whether the use of field theory, to some degree, is dependent on borders that imbue a sense that everyone is
“playing on the same board”. To claim that there is an international field with autonomy intuitively seems to be a correct idea, not least when it comes to observing international circulation and canonization, but it is less obvious whether other features of the field are transferred to the most open field of all. Bourdieu’s approach works best when the field is relatively homogenous and centralized in terms of language, media and educational systems, and the complexity of identity formation is different when applied to the world.

It is apparent how Casanova seeks to point out institutions that create some coherence and orientation in the world republic. She writes about Paris as a center for world literature, which at some point was dominant but gradually has been pushed from the top by the Anglophone publishing business, a move she laments, as the Anglophone in her view are more interested in the profitable aspects of publishing and less in the artistic aspects.

Casanova refers to two Danish authors in The World Republic of Letters. One is Henrik Stangerup, whose fascination with France is subtly given away by the title of his 1966 collection of short stories, Veritable Parisian. The other is literary historian Georg Brandes, whose Main Currents in the Literature of the 19th Century was, and remains, an influential work of comparative scholarship (98-99). In his 1899 article “World Literature”, Brandes sees France as the clear center of the literary world and suggests that achieving success in Paris will cause a ripple effect and make the author famous around the world. He also thinks that this gives an advantage to French authors, where third-tier writers will have a better chance of gaining an international readership than first-tier authors from small nations. Interestingly, two decades later, at the end of his life, Brandes complained about how hard it was to get a breakthrough in the Anglophone markets.

A variation of the focus on center is her defense of the Nobel Prize in Literature, which operates under a different logic than the market and still carries some weight in assigning cultural
capital, even at a time when the prize has been plagued by scandals. Casanova’s appreciation of
the Nobel Prize in Literature can also be connected to the hope for having a center that operates
with a logic that has autonomy:

This new degree of autonomy came about as a result of the structural complementarity
obtaining between the Nobel Prize and the power of consecration enjoyed by Paris. In
effect, the Academy affirmed (or reaffirmed) the verdicts of the capital of literature and,
as it were, grounded them in law: by making these decisions official, the Swedish
Academy with few exceptions at least through the 1960s—endorsed, ratified, and made
public the judgments of Paris, consecrating those writers who had been discovered and
promoted by its publishers and critics. Testifying to this state of affairs is not only the
large number of French authors on the list of winners (France remains the most regularly
honored nation, with twelve prizes—fourteen if one includes Beckett, officially counted
as an Irish national, and Gao Xingjian) but also, and above all, the prizes awarded to
Faulkner, Hemingway, Asturias, and Garcia Marquez, all of whom were first discovered
and celebrated in France. Approval by the literary authorities of Paris (rivaled, of course,
by their counterparts in London, who managed to achieve recognition for many of their
own authors—Kipling, Tagore, Yeats, Shaw, and so on) has long been an essential first
step in presenting oneself as a candidate for the highest and the most international award
in the world of literature. (153)

Casanova also introduces the idea of the Greenwich meridian to suggest that there is a consensus
on what counts as great literature in the global field or how far the distance is from a dominant
center (88). However, it is not quite clear what the base of this unifying meridian is. While it is
obviously easy to see that William Shakespeare and Gustave Flaubert are translated, commented on and sold in many nations, the justification for what would amount to a self-organized consensus of a transnational field comes off as underexplained in *The World Republic of Letters*, but the points are taken up and expanded in her article “Literature as a World” that emphasizes institutions such as the Nobel Prize and the prestige it has (or had at the time of writing) as an indication that there is a world literary field. Still, the fundamental premise of being able to use the field analytically is that there is a struggle on which positions are possible to take or maybe change. However, that unity becomes quite impossible when the actors are also embedded in multiple local or national traditions, each with their own particular outlook on the world, something that Casanova is quite aware off, not just in the two authorships she wrote most extensively on, Beckett and Kafka, but also writers like Danilo Kîs.

What other concepts would be useful for describing an international field of literature if not the centralizing metaphors of centers and meridians? Networks could be one option, which would focus on the movement of literature among nations and how multiple nodes exist in the world (more on this in the next section). Gisèle Sapiro has for example shown how network analysis can be useful to understand the publishing industry and the market for translations in her article “Translation and Symbolic Capital in the Era of Globalization: French Literature in the United States” (2015). In her late work *La langue mondiale: Traduction et domination*, Casanova warned against the lack of diversity and the concentration around the dominant languages of nations (130), even coining the phrase “DomiNation” to signify the key role that nations play. But if the reality for almost two centuries was that nations sought to homogenize their populations’ language and reduce bilingualism, are we not living in a time where this logic has been put in reverse, and where most nations – also out of self-interest – want their citizens to be at least bilingual beyond a national language and English, and where increased migration has
produced an extremely complex multilingualism? While the idea of a center and a dominant language makes things analytically simpler, there could be reasons for going in another direction. Something that one senses that Casanova hoped for: English is at the moment very dominant as a Lingua Franca, but it would be better for literature if the transnational language system, in the sense of Abram de Swaan, was less oligarchic (De Swaan 19).

3. New methods?

Writing my own thesis in the beginning of the 2000s on processes of canonization, it is remarkable to look back and see how much has changed in terms of available information in the literary field. And the difference is of course even more radical when it comes to the time when Pierre Bourdieu did his research on literature. Many of the points are convincing and show that he was on the right track, but one cannot shake off the feeling of sometimes looking at back-of-an-envelope calculations. This is, for example, the case when Bourdieu shows the difference between short-lived bestsellers and long-lived steady sellers that in aggregate may end up selling equally much (144). Casanova’s own work was also carried out at a time when digital resources were not as readily available as they are today, and her work is not particularly interesting in terms of exploring empirical data that could fortify her analysis, but rather in terms of laying the groundwork for a further analysis of the literary field. This is something that particularly Gisèle Sapiro has built on, drawing for example on the Index Translationum to provide more solid numerical evidence for understanding the international circulation of literature. Still, so many new ways to study the shape of the literary field have arisen since Bourdieu and Casanova wrote their studies.

One example of new resources is the way Wikipedia reflects the national field of literature, obviously with a number of biases, but also a certain robustness in the ongoing
harvesting of the knowledge of the crowd. A study of fifteen language versions of Wikipedia carried out by a group of scholars at Göttingen provided an elegant approach to understanding how world literature and national literature intersect. The work is documented on the website weltliterature.de and in the paper “World Literature according to Wikipedia” (which I am a co-author of). The website consists of several “Top-25” lists from the various versions of Wikipedia, where influence is calculated in various ways that are very much in keeping with Bourdieu’s ambitions to understand the different ways that recognition is attributed to authors. The ranking of authors is measured based on the links that are created among entries on authors as well as links to the entries of an author from the entire Wikipedia. Importantly, the site also includes the actual interest in the authors based on search history from different years, displaying a mix of steady interest and more time-bound flourishing of search activity.

The field analysis in an era of digitization would also have to take social media into account. One interesting forum is Goodreads, owned by Amazon but run on the content provided by readers, who rate works and write reviews of them. The sheer interest in particular works clearly shows how contemporary literary interest is organized, even though there are many biases, not least those created by the dominance of English. Yet, it seems significant when the interest in the works of an author differ by a factor of ten or more, making it possible to argue for the specific contribution to a world canon that an author has made. A forum like Goodreads also gives a good picture of both low and high genres with plenty of interest in contemporary fantasy literature whose works are rated on the same scale as Proust and Joyce (and often more favorably). Add to this access to library collections, reviews, and much more, and it is clear that there is a wealth of data, but it also requires a significant effort to make sense of it.

There is thus much more to be done in analyzing the international literary system, and many scholars move between corpus analyses of works and studies into circulation and
valorization. Bourdieu’s theory and Casanova’s interpretation of this on the literary field are important contributions to providing a framework for analyzing the production and use of literature in an age when there is an abundance of computational data.

4. Changing the field from the semi-periphery

I believe that I share with Casanova a fascination with what I would call excellence coming from the margins. In Mapping World Literature, I wrote about the “lonely canonicals”, writers who had made a name for themselves in the international circuit of literature, but who were otherwise the only and not prototypical representatives of their national literature. Argentinean Jorge Luis Borges would be a prime example of that along with Portuguese Fernando Pessoa and Danish Karen Blixen (aka Isak Dinesen). Borges wrote about the freedom that came from writing from the margins in “The Argentinean Writer and Tradition”, where he encouraged writers to be ambitious even if their culture was marginalized in the world. Trusting that their particular culture would add something to their writing on any subject was Borges’ defense against a return to provincialism, something which obviously worked out for him in a very unique way.

Casanova’s key authors Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka are a little different, as they wrote in dominant languages from the beginning, but they share the qualities of being unlikely canonical figures as well as renewers of literature.

It may be an overstatement to call Beckett and Kafka heroes in Casanova’s work, but it is not altogether wrong. And there is nothing wrong with having preferences that combine a fascination for their writing with the way that they fit into a larger narrative of challenging and changing the literary center. Casanova is also very clear about how she sees both of them as agents of change in the overlapping fields of national literary space and world literature. Writers
like Beckett, Joyce, and Kafka can only be understood in relation to the way they sought to
transgress, challenge and sometimes affirm their national literary heritage. This should be
understood in the widest sense, including the relation to aesthetic, linguistic and formal choices,
eventually meaning that “trying to characterize a writer’s work, one must situate it with respect to
two things: the place occupied by his native literary space within world literature and his own
position within this space.” (41)

Since Casanova published La République mondiale des lettres, it is significant how
immigrant writers and authors with a two-cultured background have become increasingly
important in world literature. As Sigrid Löffler writes in her 2014 book Die Neue Weltliteratur
und ihre grossen Erzähler, many of the most interesting contemporary authors are migrants,
whose perspective on the world is different, not least due to their linguistic situation:

This new world literature is a dynamic, rapidly growing, post-ethnic, and transnational
literature, a literature without permanent residence, written by migrants, commuters
between the cultures, transit travelers in a world in motion, whose most advanced
representatives such as Taiye Selasi, Mohsin Hamid, or Teju Cole have also left post-
colonialism behind. This literature can no longer be understood with the categories of
national literature. It opens up new narrative worlds and spaces of experience and
operates in global networks in which the differences between the periphery and the center
disappeared long ago. It is a broad field which currently is by no means ready for an
overall view. Nobody can claim to have an overview of this immense and exploding
amount of material, let alone to master it. (Löffler 2014, 17, my translation)
I would claim that the success of such writers can in part be explained by the framework provided by Bourdieu and Casanova. They not only address the topic of migration, which has become one of the most debated and strongest forces of cultural change in nations, but they also actively use their background to write differently. One obvious way of doing this is by bringing multilingualism into the texts, but while this is significant in, for example, Junot Díaz’ *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, it is less important than the ability to juxtapose different conceptions of literature and bring the cultural meeting into the texts themselves while drawing on own experiences. While the autobiographical experience is often frowned upon, it could be said to be an integral part of Bourdieu’s theory of literature. In *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu insists that Flaubert made a representation of the social structures of his time in *L’Education sentimentale*, arguing that the social structures permeated his writing in a way that he could not be conscious about, but which was embodied through his “habitus” (3-5, 214-15). This way Bourdieu subtly and convincingly defends the importance of the writer, who becomes a carrier of social structures, much like Borges insisted that the Argentinean writer could not change the fact that he was Argentinean, but he could choose between being worldly or provincially oriented. If one accepts this, it would mean that the migrant writer can express a particular constellation of cultural meetings in a way that lets the underlying conditions of these come through. Of course, one should be careful about making truth claims based on authenticity, but at least this does seem to be one of the consequences of Bourdieu’s approach to literature.

Timothy Garton Ash presents a questionable but also wonderful argument in an article on witness literature, where he claims that the difference between the Holocaust memoir of the Italian survivor and author Primo Levi and the baseless childhood memories of Binjamin Wilkomirski as they were presented in the volume *Fragments* comes down to stylistics. Quite
unusually for a historian, Garton Ash essentially says that one text does not embody the experience in a way that a true witness could have written it (Thomsen 117-18).

However, this does not pertain so much to Bourdieu’s position, which is not explicitly concerned with authenticity and testimony but with a wider grasp of the social structures. In line with this, Casanova laments literature’s separation from the world at the end of *The World Republic of Letters*:

> This in turn has led to their exclusion or expulsion—to use the language of the Church, their definitive excommunication—from history, which stands accused of being incapable of rising high enough in the heaven of the pure forms of literary art. The two universes—the “world” and “literature”—were thus declared incommensurable. Barthes spoke of two continents: “On the one hand the world, with its profusion of facts, political, social, economic, ideological; and on the other the work, apparently solitary, always ambiguous, since it lends itself to several meanings at the same time . . . From one continent to the other a few signals are exchanged, a few connivances underscored. But for the most part the study of each of these two continents proceeds in an autonomous fashion: the two geographies seldom coincide.” (349)

As I mentioned in the opening, one could see Casanova as a reluctant part of world literature studies, in some ways more modest and more realistic about the challenges of creating a world republic of letters that would be governed by more than economic rationales. Again, looking twenty years back to the publication of *The World Republic of Letters*, it is striking how much the world has changed. The continued growth in China and India combined with their already strong literacy and international orientation has made it clear how vast these markets are for books.
More importantly, they are in a position to re-define themselves as literary cultures where national and international orientation will take place under conditions that have never been seen before in the history of literature. Will these two nations with just short of half of the world’s population increasingly become more globalized or will they opt for local authors? This is, of course, not a matter of the winner taking it all, but of balances that may tip one or the other way. In her study *Consuming Literature*, Shuyu Kong saw signs of an increased demand for fiction written according to Western models, but with a distinct local content that reflected the new urban professional Chinese readers (44). That would be a world literature modeled on the waves of genres that Franco Moretti has put in the center in his attempt to find a way for world and literature to meet. Still, in Casanova’s conclusion in *The World Republic of Letters*, she stands by her fascination with the writers that come to represent universality from an unlikely position, writers who are able to change the field by being different (355).

**Works cited**


