CASANOVA, Pascale. *La République Mondiale des Lettres*. Paris, Seuil, 1999.

John Milton*

A book which I highly recommend to all of those interested in the relationship between translation and comparative literature is *La République Mondiale des Lettres*, by Pascale Casanova.

Casanova starts from the premise that there is a world "Republic of Letters", with Paris right at its centre until the early 20th century, when London began to take on more importance, and, then New York. These capitals become the central reference points in the world of literature, Casanova's "Greenwich".

The Parisian domination dates from the 16th century, when Du Bellay and the other writers of the *Pléiade*, followed by Malherbe, managed to establish French as not only the national language of polite and literary society in France, but also the dominant cultural tool in Europe. This cultural dominance of France, and more especially Paris, would wane only in the middle of the 20th century.

The choices of a writer will depend very much on his geographical position. Writers belonging to one of the central literatures will behave very differently to those from ex-centric literatures. Those from central literatures will be freer to experiment with form; they will not need to worry about asserting a national culture. These literatures will attract "displaced" writers from minor literatures, who can only achieve worldwide recognition by being translated into a major language or by writing in that language. Prime examples are Strindberg, who, in 1883, decided to "conquer" Paris, and began co-translating his plays into French and getting them performed in Paris; Nabokov, an exile first in France then in the US, who moved from being a Russian to a French then to an English writer; and Milan Kundera now writes in French rather than his native Czech.

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Writers from ex-centric, lesser-known literatures will often feel obliged to assert a national "folk" culture and will find it difficult to write "against" their own small countries, whereas writers from large, "established" literatures will not have this problem. This nationalist bent dates from Herder's view that each nation possessed its own singularity and genius, and that this could be seen in its language and national folk literature.

Herder was highly influential not only in Germany, which, at the beginning of the 19th century, was under both French military and cultural domination, but also smaller countries such as Serbia, Croatia, Greece, Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia. Thus the alternative to French classical domination was a return to national, often medieval, folk cultures.

Translation was also of prime importance. Germany looked to the untamed and unregulated genius of Shakespeare as a counterpoint to French classicism. In a flood of translation, analyzed by Antoine Berman in *L''Épreuve de l'Étranger*, the German Romantics gave enormous importance to the translator and bringing the the classics of world literature into the German language, translating against the *belles infidèles* in much more faithful versions.

There are considerable pressures on the author from the smaller country, who may feel that he will have to write about national values and interests in order to propagate the values of that country, and, if he does not do so, will not be published, sell, or indeed, will be regarded as a "traitor" to the national cause. Indeed, the innovative writer from this smaller literature may find himself having to flee the parochial atmosphere he finds himself in and move to Paris, London or New York.

And relations between the admiring ex-centric and the metropolis may take on different forms: recent Nobel Prize Winner V. S. Naipaul, born in Trinidad of an Indian family, originally tied labourers, has become more English than the English, the Wiltshire Lord of the Manor; Wallon Henri Michaux decided to become a "displaced person", refusing any connection with his native Belgium; Rumanian E. M. Cioran adopted a hyper-classical French style; the Swiss author Ramuz, after being rejected by Paris, believed that the values of rural Switzerland Vaudois he portrayed were nearer to classical values than those of France.

There are structural parallels, between the "national" writers, those who have written about "national" themes, who have been very popular inside the country, but often unknown outside, and who have often been conservative, both thematically and stylistically, and those who have insisted on the international autonomous quality of literature, who have lived in exile, usually in Paris, London or New York. Casanova contrasts the national 20th century "picaresque" Camilo José Cela with the displaced Juan Benet in Spain; the formally and politically conservative V. S. Naipaul with the stylistically more ambitious Salman Rushdie, and Chinua Achebe, concentrating on narratives set in a village environment in Nigeria, with the more stylistically varied Wole Soyinka in Nigeria: and Jorge Amado's deliberate decision to ignore the call of the modernists and to write politically motivated clear narrations with the attempt of Mario de Andrade to produce a Brazilianized Portuguese and a Brazilian (anti-)hero in *Macunaíma*. Here of course, Amado's works have become international bestsellers, whereas *Macunaíma* is relatively unknown internationally.

The case of Ireland is paradigmatic for a small ex-centric country. At the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries an Irish tradition was recreated in order to back up the political revolutionary movement. Yeats and Lady Gregory created an Irish theatre and Irish folktales; the legend of Cuchulain underwent a number of translations from Old Irish (the subject of Maria Tymoczko's *Translation in a Postcolonial Context*); the Gaelic League tried to spread to study of the Irish language throughout Ireland; J. M. Synge attempted to use the oral ways of speech of the west of Ireland in his plays.

On the other hand, Sean O'Casey developed realist drama against Yeats' aestheticism; Shaw, in order to "denationalize" his writing, and write with greater freedom and further the international socialist cause, chose London; and Joyce and Beckett chose Paris, which was politically neutral, and open to experimentation in literary form.

Casanova places Kafka very definitely as a socialist Jewish anti-Zionist writer writing for the cause of a future Jewish "nation". Like Joyce, who subverted the English language from within,

Kafka introduced Jewish literary, political and social questions into the German language and literature, and attempted to find, in German, the categories of an emerging Yiddish literature such as tales, legends, myths and chronicles. Thus Kafka's work is that of a translation without an original.

Paris has always been the city which has attracted the innovators. Joyce's path was followed by numerous others: Oscar Wilde, Rubén Darío, Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemmingway, Alejo Carpentier, Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, just to name a few. Even for those who actually did not live there, Paris was pivotal: Byron became known throughout the world through French translations; Poe came to South America through Baudelaire's translations; Paris was pivotal Faulkner, who became known in Europe through Coindreau's translations of his work into French.

Local revolutionary literary movements may be founded on Paris-based values. The Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier was instrumental in forming the lines along which the Latin American "boom" was founded. In the same way that Du Bellay looked to the Ancients to provide the benchmarks on which the French language and culture would develop, America had to look to Europe to find the techniques and the forms of construction which could be adapted to the Latin American setting. European knowhow and technique must be transferred, though not copied. Thus magic realism, though helping to define the independence of Latin American fiction, was grounded in European modernism and futurism. Brazilian critic Antonio Candido mentions that the really creative Brazilian poets, such as Carlos Drummond de Andrade and Murilo Mendes, came a generation after the "revolutionary modernists".

Casanova's range of reference is wide and impressive: from Eastern Europe to South America and Africa; from Du Bellay to the Latin American "boom". Descriptive translation scholars will appreciate this fleshing out of many of the bones of Even-Zohar's Polysystem Theory, though Casanova is hardly dependent on him, mentioning him only once. The centre of the literary system of the world is Paris, the edges are Yugoslavia, or Brazil. The writers at the middle are named, as are the tactics of those attempting to

get into the central space or those who reject it and build up their own movements, or those who are content to rule the roost in their own minor systems. What I particularly admire is Casanova's sense of space and geography: the writer's choices will be determined by historical, but also geographical space, and a move towards the centre or away from it, or contact with the centre will modify these possibilities.