23 Kafka's *klein*—suggesting simply 'little literatures'—was overtranslated by Marthe Robert as 'minor literatures', an expression whose subsequent fortunes are well known. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*, Paris 1975, p. 75; and my 'Nouvelles considérations sur les littératures dites mineures', *Littérature classique*, no. 31, 1997, pp. 233–47.

24 Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th–18th century: Volume III, The Perspective of the World*, London 1984, p. 68; *Civilisation matérielle*, vol. 3, p. 9.

25 See the debate on this crucial point which has been taking place in Latin America since the 1960s, and which is well reconstructed by Efraín Kristal in 'Considering Coldly . . .', NLR 15, May–June 2002, pp. 67–71. Here we can clearly see that the role of agents of social and political transformation, notably attributed to writers of the 'boom', was largely illusory.

26 August Strindberg briefly became a 'French writer' between 1887 and 1897, writing *Le Plaidoyer d'un fou* and *Inferno* directly in French for the purposes of international recognition.

27 Fuentes, *Geografía de la novela*, Madrid 1993, p. 218.

28 In his *Autobiography*, Darío writes: 'I dreamed of Paris ever since I was a child, to the extent that when I prayed I asked God not to let me die without seeing Paris. Paris was for me like a paradise where one could breathe the essence of earthly happiness'. *Obras completas*, Madrid 1950–55, vol. 1, p. 102.

29 What Perry Anderson has called 'a declaration of cultural independence': *The Origins of Postmodernity*, London and New York 1998, p. 3.

30 Efraín Kristal's analysis of this point is very illuminating and entirely convincing. But he seems to believe that the idea of appropriation or diversion contradicts that of emancipation. Could we not on the contrary put forward the hypothesis that this initial diversion (necessary if it is true that no symbolic revolution can take place without resources) makes possible a creative renewal? After Rubén Darío had played the role of aesthetic accelerator, *modernismo* of course became an entirely separate Hispanic poetic movement, inventing its own codes and norms without any reference to France.

31 This is why I fully subscribe to Franco Moretti's affirmation, which could serve as a motto for a discipline still in its early stages: 'Without collective work, world literature will always remain a mirage'. See 'More Conjectures', NLR 20, March–April 2003, p. 75.

Chapter 27

Milan Kundera

DIE WELTLITERATUR (2005)

MILAN KUNDERA (B. 1929) IS a French-Czech novelist and essayist. His novels are read in most parts of the world, and in his essays he constantly returns to the theme of the nature of the novel and its importance to European and world literature. A sometimes extravagant essayist, he has produced a number of challenging descriptions of the relationships between different national literatures and the deeper values in the genre of the novel. The influence of the cosmopolitan spirit of the eighteenth century is a recurring element in his writing, while he at the same time acknowledges the importance of cultural diversity which nation-states help to preserve. His own background as an immigrant who has switched from the Czech to the French language informs his own writing on the subject as well as his involvement in the translations of his own novels.

In an earlier essay on the writings of Aimé Césaire, "Beau comme une rencontre multiple," Kundera argues that a complex semiperiphery of a nation can be a productive challenge to its writers, an issue which has been significant in his attempts to describe his own roots in a Central Europe whose borders are not as easily defined as those of Scandinavia. The complexities become even greater when we consider many of the post-colonial nations whose ties to the distant colonial powers continue to exert a strong influence on their literatures.

In the essay reprinted here, "Die Weltliteratur", Kundera defines two kinds of provincialism: one which he ascribes to the overconfident large nations which do not need the rest of the world, and one characteristic of the small nations which do not think that they have anything to offer the world. Both provincialisms are fallacies that need to be overcome. Additionally, he makes a claim similar to that of Pascale Casanova's that there are a number of writers who have fared much better in world literature than in their national context, which again makes the case for the existence of a world literary circuit.

Milan Kundera, "Die Weltliteratur," *Le Rideau*, Paris: Gallimard, 2005, pp. 45–72. English translation in *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* in the translation of Linda Asher, London: Faber and Faber, 2007.

Maximum diversity in minimum space

Whether he is nationalist or cosmopolitan, rooted or uprooted, a European is profoundly conditioned by his relation to his homeland; the national problematic is probably more complex, more grave in Europe than elsewhere, but in any case it is different there. Added to that is another particularity: alongside the large nations Europe contains small nations, several of which have, in the past two centuries, attained or re-attained their political independence. Their existence may have brought me to understand that cultural diversity is the great European value. In a period when the Russian world tried to reshape my small country in its image, I worked out my own ideal of Europe thus: *maximum diversity in minimum space*. The Russians no longer rule my native land, but that ideal is even more imperiled now.

All the nations of Europe are living a common destiny, but each is living it differently, based on its own separate experience. This is why the history of each European art (painting, novel, music, and so on) seems like a relay race in which the various nations pass along similar testimony from one to the next. Polyphonic music had its beginnings in France, it continued its development in Italy, attained incredible complexity in the Netherlands, and reached its fulfillment in Germany, in Bach's works; the upwelling of the English novel of the eighteenth century is followed by the era of the French novel, then by the Russian novel, then by the Scandinavian, and so on. The dynamism and long life of the history of the European arts are inconceivable without the existence of all these nations whose diverse experiences constitute an inexhaustible reservoir of inspiration.

I think of Iceland. In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries a literary work thousands of pages long was born there: the sagas. At the time neither the French nor the English created such a prose work in their national tongues! We should certainly ponder this thoroughly: the first great prose treasure of Europe was created in its smallest land, which even today numbers fewer than three-hundred thousand inhabitants.

Irreparable inequality

The word "Munich" has become the symbol of capitulation to Hitler. But to be more concrete: at Munich, in the autumn of 1938, the four great nations, Germany, Italy, France and Great Britain, negotiated the fate of a small country to whom they denied the very right to speak. In a room apart the two Czech diplomats waited all night to be led, the next morning, down long hallways into a room where Chamberlain and Daladier, weary, blasé, yawning, informed them of the death sentence.

"A faraway country of which we know little. . . ." Those famous words by which Chamberlain sought to justify the sacrifice of Czechoslovakia were accurate. In Europe there are the large countries on one side and the small on the other; there are the nations seated in the negotiating chambers and those who wait all night in the antechambers.

What distinguishes the small nations from the large is not the quantitative criterion of the number of their inhabitants; it is something deeper: for them their existence is not a self-evident certainty but always a question, a wager, a risk; they are on the defensive against History, that force that is bigger than they, that does not take them into consideration, that does not even notice them. ("It is only by opposing History as such that we can oppose today's history," Witold Gombrowicz wrote.)

There are as many Poles as there are Spaniards. But Spain is an old power whose existence has never been under threat, whereas History has taught the Poles what it means not to exist. Deprived of their State, they lived for over a century on death row. "Poland has not *yet* perished" is the poignant first line of their national anthem and, in a letter to Czeslaw Miłosz

some fifty years ago, Gombrowicz wrote a sentence that could never have occurred to any Spaniard: "If, in a hundred years, our language still exists. . . ."

Let's try to imagine that the Icelandic sagas had been written in English: Their heroes' names would be as familiar to us as Tristan or Don Quixote; their singular aesthetic character, oscillating between chronicle and fiction, would have provoked all sorts of theories; people would have argued over whether they should or should not be considered the first European novels. I don't mean to say they have been forgotten; after centuries of indifference they are now being studied in universities throughout the world; but they belong to the "archaeology of letters," they do not influence living literature.

Given that the French are unused to distinguishing between nation and State, I often hear Kafka described as a Czech writer (from 1918 on he was, indeed, a citizen of the newly constituted Czechoslovakia). Of course that is nonsense: Kafka wrote solely in German, need we recall, and he considered himself a German writer. But suppose for a moment he had written his books in Czech. Today who would know them? Before he managed to force Kafka on the world's awareness, Max Brod had to deploy enormous efforts, over the course of twenty years, and that was with the support of the greatest German writers! Even if a Prague editor had managed to publish the books of a hypothetical Czech Kafka, none of his compatriots (that is to say, no Czech) would have had the authority needed to familiarize the world with those extravagant texts written in the language of a "faraway country of which we know little." No, believe me, nobody would know Kafka today—nobody—if he had been a Czech.

Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke* was published in Polish in 1937. It had to wait fifteen years finally to be read, and rejected, by a French publisher. And it took a good many years more for the French to see him in their bookstores.

Die Weltliteratur

There are two basic contexts in which a work of art may be placed: either in the history of its nation (we can call this the *small context*), or else in the supranational history of its art (the *large context*). We are accustomed to seeing music quite naturally in the large context: knowing what language Orlando de Lassus or Bach spoke matters little to a musicologist, but because a novel is bound up with its language, in nearly every university in the world it is studied almost exclusively in the small, national context. Europe has not managed to view its literature as a historical unit, and I continue to insist that this is an irreparable intellectual loss. Because, if we consider just the history of the novel, it was to Rabelais that Laurence Sterne was reacting, it was Sterne who set off Diderot, it was from Cervantes that Fielding drew constant inspiration, it was against Fielding that Stendhal measured himself, it was Flaubert's tradition living on in Joyce, it was through his reflection on Joyce that Hermann Broch developed his own poetics of the novel, and it was Kafka who showed García Márquez the possibility of departing from tradition to "write another way."

What I just said, Goethe was the first to say: "National literature no longer means much these days, we are entering the era of *Weltliteratur*—world literature—and it is up to each of us to hasten this development." This is, so to speak, Goethe's testament. Another testament betrayed. For, open any textbook, any anthology: world literature is always presented as a juxtaposition of national literatures . . . as a history of literatures! Of literatures in the plural!

And yet Rabelais, ever undervalued by his compatriots, was never better understood than by a Russian, Bakhtin; Dostoyevsky than by a Frenchman, Gide; Ibsen than by an Irishman, Shaw; Joyce than by an Austrian, Broch. The universal importance of the generation of great North Americans—Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos—was first brought to light by French writers ("In France I'm the father of a literary movement," Faulkner wrote in

1946, complaining of the deaf ear he encountered in his own country). These few examples are not bizarre exceptions to the rule; no, they are the rule: geographic distance sets the observer back from the local context and allows him to embrace the *large context* of world literature, the only approach that can bring out a novel's *aesthetic value*—that is to say: the previously unseen aspects of existence that this particular novel has managed to make clear; the novelty of form it has found.

Do I mean by this that to judge a novel one can do without a knowledge of its original language? I do indeed mean exactly that! Gide did not know Russian, Shaw did not know Norwegian, Sartre did not read Dos Passos in the original. If the books of Witold Gombrowicz and Danilo Kiš had depended solely on the judgment of people who read Polish and Serbo-Croatian, their radical aesthetic newness would never have been discovered.

(And what about the professors of foreign literatures? Is it not their very natural mission to study works in the context of world literature? Not a chance. In order to demonstrate their competence as experts, they make a great point of identifying with the *small* (national) *context* of the literatures they teach. They adopt its opinions, its tastes, its prejudices. Not a chance—it is in foreign universities that a work of art is most intractably mired in its home province.)

The provincialism of small nations

How to define "provincialism"? As the inability (or the refusal) to see one's own culture in the *large context*. There are two kind of provincialism: of large nations and of small ones. The large nations resist the Goethean idea of "world literature" because their own literature seems to them sufficiently rich that they need take no interest in what people write elsewhere. Kazimierz Brandys says this in his *Paris Notebooks: 1985–87:* "The French student has greater gaps in his knowledge of world culture than the Polish student, but he can get away with it, for his own culture contains more or less all the aspects, all the possibilities and phases of the world's evolution."

Small nations are reticent toward the *large context* for the exact opposite reasons: they hold world culture in high esteem but feel it to be something alien, a sky above their heads, distant, inaccessible, an ideal reality with little connection to their national literature. The small nation inculcates in its writer the conviction that he belongs to that place alone. To set his gaze beyond the boundary of the homeland, to join his colleagues in the supranational territory of art, is considered pretentious, disdainful of his own people. And since the small nations are often going through situations in which their survival is at stake, they readily manage to present their attitude as morally justified.

Franz Kafka speaks of this in his *Diaries*; from the standpoint of a "large" literature, in this case German, he observes Yiddish and Czech literature: A small nation, he says, has great respect for its writers because they provide it with pride "in face of the hostile surrounding world"; for a small nation, literature is "less a matter of literary history" than "a matter of the people," and it is that exceptional osmosis between the literature and its people that facilitates "the literature's diffusion throughout the country, where it binds with political slogans." From there Kafka arrives at this startling observation: "What in large literatures goes on at a lower level and constitutes a nonindispensable basement of the structure, here takes place in bright light; what there provokes a brief flurry of interest, here brings down nothing less than a life-or-death decree."

These last words remind me of a chorus of Smetana's (composed in Prague in 1864) with the lines: "Rejoice, rejoice, voracious raven, you have a treat in store: soon you will feast on a traitor to our country." How could such a great musician ever offer up such

bloodthirsty foolishness? Was it some youthful error? No excuse there—he was forty then. And actually, what did it even mean at the time, to be a "traitor to our country"? Someone joining up with commando bands to slit the gullets of his fellow citizens? Not at all: a "traitor" was any Czech who decided to leave Prague for Vienna and participate peacefully in German life over there. As Kafka said, what somewhere else "provokes a brief flurry of interest, here brings down nothing less than a life-or-death decree."

A nation's possessiveness toward its artists works as a *small-context terrorism*, reducing the whole meaning of a work to the role it plays in its homeland. I open an old mimeograph copy of some lectures on composition that Vincent d'Indy gave at the Paris Schola Cantorum, where a whole generation of French musicians was trained in the early twentieth century. There are paragraphs on Smetana and Dvořák, particularly on Smetana's two string quartets. What are we told? A single assertion, several times restated in different terms: this "folk-style" music was inspired "by national songs and dances." Nothing else? Nothing. A platitude and a misinterpretation. A platitude, because traces of folk music are found everywhere, in Haydn, in Chopin, in Liszt, in Brahms; a misinterpretation, because Smetana's two quartets are actually a highly personal musical confession, written under tragic circumstances: the composer had just lost his hearing, and these (splendid!) quartets are, he said, "the swirling storm of music in the head of a man gone deaf."

How could Vincent d'Indy be so deeply mistaken? Very probably he was unfamiliar with those works and was simply repeating what he had heard. His opinion reflected Czech society's idea about these two composers: to make political use of their fame (to display pride "in face of the hostile surrounding world"), it had pulled together scraps of folklore to be found in the music and stitched them into a national banner to fly above the work. The outside world was just accepting politely (or maliciously) the interpretation that was offered.

The provincialism of large nations

And what about provincialism in the large nations? The definition is the same: the inability (or the refusal) to imagine one's own culture in the *large context*. A few years ago, before the end of the past century, a Paris newspaper polled thirty figures who belonged to a kind of intellectual establishment of the day: journalists, historians, sociologists, publishers, and a few writers. Each was asked to name, in order of importance, the ten most notable books in the whole history of France, and from those combined thirty lists the paper compiled an honor panel of a hundred works. Even though the question as asked ("What are the books that have made France what it is?") might allow for several interpretations, still the outcome does give a rather good picture of what a French intellectual elite today considers important in its country's literature.

Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* came in first. That will surprise a foreign writer. Never having considered the book important either for himself or for the history of literature, he will suddenly see that the French literature he adores is not the same one the French adore. In eleventh place is de Gaulle's *War Memories*. According such value to a book by a statesman, a soldier, would almost never occur outside of France. And yet what is disconcerting is not that, but the fact that the greatest masterpieces appear only farther down the list! Rabelais stands in fourteenth place—Rabelais after de Gaulle! In this connection I read an article by an eminent French university professor saying that his country's literature lacks a founding figure like Dante for the Italians, Shakespeare for the English, and so on. Imagine—in the eyes of his countrymen, Rabelais lacks the aura of a founding figure! Yet in the eyes of nearly every great novelist of our time he is, along with Cervantes, the founder of a whole art, the art of the novel.

And what of the eighteenth-, the nineteenth-century novel, France's glory? *The Red and the Black* stands twenty-second on the list; *Madame Bovary* is twenty-fifth; *Germinal* thirty-second; *The Human Comedy* only thirty-fourth (Is that possible? *The Human Comedy*, without which European literature is inconceivable!); *Dangerous Liaisons* fiftieth; poor *Bouvard and Pécuchet* come trailing in last, like a couple of breathless dunces. And some masterwork novels do not appear at all among the hundred elect: *The Charterhouse of Parma; Sentimental Education; Jacques the Fatalist* (true, only within the large context of world-literature can the incomparable novelty of that book be appreciated).

And what about the twentieth century? Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*, seventh place. Camus's *The Stranger*, twenty-second. And after that? Very little. Very little of what's called modern literature, nothing at all of modern poetry. As if France's enormous influence on modern art had never occurred! As if, for instance, Apollinaire (absent from this honor list) had not inspired a whole era of European poetry!

And there's something still more astonishing: the absence of Beckett and Ionesco. How many dramatists of the past century have had such power, such influence? One? Two? No more than that. Here's a recollection: the emancipation of cultural life in Communist Czechoslovakia was bound up with the little theaters that were born at the very start of the sixties. It was there that I first saw a performance of Ionesco, and it was unforgettable: the explosion of an imagination, the irruption of a disrespectful spirit. I often said that the Prague Spring began eight years before 1968, with the Ionesco plays staged at the little theater called On the Balustrade.

One might object that the honor panel I describe is evidence less of provincialism than of the recent intellectual orientation that gives ever smaller weight to aesthetic criteria: that the people who voted for *Les Misérables* were thinking not of the book's importance in the history of the novel but of its great social resonance in France. Of course, but that only demonstrates that indifference to aesthetic value inevitably shifts the whole culture back into provincialism. France is not merely the land where the French live, it is also the country other people watch and draw inspiration from. And those are the values (aesthetic, philosophical) by which a foreigner appreciates works born outside his own country. Once again, the rule holds: these values are hard to perceive from the viewpoint of the *small context*, even if it be the prideful small context of a large nation.

The man from the east

In the nineteen-sixties I left my country for France, and there I was astonished to discover that I was "an East European exile." Indeed, to the French, my country was part of the European Orient. I hastened to explain to all and sundry what was the real scandal of our situation: stripped of national sovereignty, we had been annexed not only by another country but by a whole other *world*, the world of the European East which, rooted as it is in the ancient past of Byzantium, possesses its own historical problematic, its own architectural look, its own religion (Orthodox), its alphabet (Cyrillic, derived from Greek writing), and also its own sort of communism (no one knows or ever will know what Central-European communism would have been without Russia's domination, but in any case it would not have resembled the communism we did experience).

Gradually I understood that I came from a "faraway country of which we know little." The people around me placed great importance on politics but knew almost nothing about geography: they saw us as "communized," not "taken over." Actually, hadn't the Czechs always been part of the same "Slavic world" as the Russians? I explained that while there is a *linguistic* unity among the Slavic nations, there is no Slavic *culture*, no Slavic *world*;

that the history of the Czechs, like that of the Poles, the Slovaks, the Croats, or the Slovenes (and of course, of the Hungarians, who are not at all Slavic) is entirely Western: Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque; close contact with the Germanic world; struggle of Catholicism against the Reformation. Never anything to do with Russia, which was far off, another world. Only the Poles lived in direct relation with Russia—a relation much like a death struggle.

But my efforts were useless: the "Slavic world" idea persists as an ineradicable commonplace in world historiography. I open the *Universal History* volume of the prestigious "Pléiade" series: in the chapter called "The Slavic World," the great Czech theologian Jan Hus is irremediably separated from the Englishman John Wyclif (whose disciple Hus was), and from the German Martin Luther (who saw Hus as his teacher and precursor). Poor Hus: after being burned at the stake at Constance, now he must suffer through a dreadful eternity in the company of Ivan the Terrible, with whom he would not want to exchange a single word.

Nothing beats an argument from personal experience: in the late 1970s, I was sent the manuscript of a foreword written for one of my novels by an eminent Slavist, who placed me in permanent comparison (flattering, of course; at the time, no one meant me harm) with Dostoyevsky, Gogol, Bunin, Pasternak, Mandelstam, and the Russian dissidents. In alarm, I stopped its publication. Not that I felt any antipathy for those great Russians; on the contrary, I admired them all, but in their company I became a different person. I still recall the strange anguish the piece stirred in me: that displacement into a context that was not mine felt like a deportation.

Central Europe

Between the *large context* of the world and the *small context* of the nation, a middle step might be imagined: say, a *median context*. Between Sweden and the world, that step is Scandinavia. For Colombia, it is Latin America. And for Hungary, for Poland? In my emigration, I tried to work out a response to that question, and the title of a piece I wrote at the time sums it up: *A Kidnapped West, or The Tragedy of Central Europe*.

Central Europe: What is it? The whole collection of the small nations between two powers, Russia and Germany. The easternmost edge of the West. All right, but what nations do we mean? Does it include the three Baltic countries? And what about Romania, tugged toward the East by the Orthodox Church, toward the West by its Romance language? Or Austria, which for a long while represented the political center of that ensemble? Austrian writers are studied exclusively in the context of Germany, and would not be pleased (nor would I be, if I were they) to find themselves returned to that multilingual hodgepodge that is Central Europe. And anyhow, have all those nations shown any clear and enduring wish to create a common grouping? Not at all. For a few centuries, most of them did belong to a large State, the Hapsburg Empire, which in the end they wished only to flee.

All these comments relativize the import of the Central Europe notion, demonstrate its vague and approximate nature, but at the same time clarify it. Is it true that the borders of Central Europe are impossible to trace in any exact, lasting way? It is indeed! Those nations have never been masters of either their own destinies or their borders. They have rarely been the subjects of history, almost always its objects. Their unity was *unintentional*. They were kin to one another not through will, not through fellow-feeling or through linguistic proximity, but by reason of similar experience, by reason of common historical situations that brought them together, at different times, in different configurations, and within shifting, never definitive, borders.

Central Europe cannot be reduced to "Mitteleuropa" (I never use the term) as it is called, even in their own non-Germanic tongues, by people who know it only through the Vienna window; it is *polycentric*, and looks different seen from Warsaw, from Budapest, or from Zagreb. But from whatever perspective one looks at it, a common history emerges: looking out from the Czech window, I see there, in the mid-fourteenth century, the first Central European university at Prague; in the fifteenth century I see the Hussite revolution foreshadowing the Reformation; in the seventeenth century I see the Hapsburg Empire gradually constructing itself out of Bohemia, Hungary, Austria; I see the wars that, over two centuries, will defend the West against the Turkish invasion; I see the Counter-Reformation, with the flowering of baroque art that stamps an architectural unity on the whole of that vast territory, right up to the Baltic countries.

The nineteenth century set off patriotism in all those peoples who refused to let themselves be assimilated, that is to say Germanized. Even the Austrians, despite their dominant position within the empire, could not avoid making a choice between their Austrian identity and membership in the great German entity in which they would be dissolved. And how can we not mention Zionism, also born in Central Europe from that same refusal to assimilate, that same desire of the Jews to live as a nation with their own language! One of Europe's fundamental problems, the problem of the small nations, is nowhere else manifested in so revelatory, so focused, and so exemplary a way.

In the twentieth century, after the 1914 war, several independent states rose from the ruins of the Hapsburg Empire, and thirty years later all of them but Austria found themselves under Russian domination: a situation utterly unprecedented in the whole of Central European history! There followed a long period of anti-Soviet revolts: in Poland, in bloodied Hungary, then in Czechoslovakia, and again in Poland, at length and powerfully. To my mind there is nothing more admirable in the Europe of the second half of the twentieth century than that golden chain of revolts that, over forty years, eroded the empire of the East, made it ungovernable, and tolled the death knell of its reign.

The contrasting paths of the modernist revolt

I don't believe universities will ever teach the history of Central Europe as a separate discipline; in the dormitory of the hereafter, Jan Hus will always be breathing the same Slavic exhalations as Ivan the Terrible. In fact, would I myself ever have made use of that notion, and so tenaciously, if I had not been rocked by the political drama of my native land? Surely not. There are words drowsing in the mist that, at the right moment, rush to our aid. By merely being defined, the concept of Central Europe unmasked the lie of Yalta, that deal-making among the three victors of the war, who shifted the age-old boundary between the European East and West several hundred kilometers over to the west.

The notion of Central Europe came to my aid on another occasion, too, this time for reasons having nothing to do with politics; it happened when I began to marvel at the fact that the terms "novel," "modern art," "modern novel," meant something other for me than for my French friends. It was not a disagreement; it was, quite modestly, the recognition of a difference between the two traditions that had shaped us. In a brief historical panorama, our two cultures rose up before me as nearly symmetrical antitheses. In France: classicism, rationalism, the libertine spirit, and then in the nineteenth century, the era of the great novel. In Central Europe: the reign of an especially ecstatic strain of baroque art and then in the nineteenth century, the moralizing idyllicism of Biedermeier, the great Romantic poetry, and very few great novels. Central Europe's matchless strength lay in its music which,

from Haydn to Schoenberg, from Liszt to Bartók, over two centuries embraced in itself all the essential trends in European music; Central Europe staggered beneath the glory of its music.

What was "modern art," that intriguing storm of the first third of the twentieth century? A radical revolt against the aesthetic of the past; that is obvious of course, except that the pasts were not alike. In France modern art—anti-rationalist, anti-classicist, anti-realist, anti-naturalist—extended the great lyrical rebellion of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. It found its privileged expression in painting and, above all, in poetry, which was its chosen art. The novel, by contrast, was anathematized (most notably by the surrealists); it was considered outmoded, forever sealed into its conventional form. In Central Europe the situation was different: opposition to the ecstatic, romantic, sentimental, musical tradition led the modernism of a few geniuses, the most original, toward the art that is the privileged sphere of analysis, lucidity, irony: that is, toward the novel.

My great pleiades

In Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities* (1930–41), Clarisse and Walter played four-hand piano, "unloosed like two locomotives hurtling along side by side." "Seated on their small stools, they were irritated, amorous, or sad about nothing, or perhaps each of them about something separate," and only "the authority of the music joined them together. . . . There was between them a fusion of the kind that occurs in great public panics, where hundreds of people who an instant earlier differed in every way make the same motions, utter the same mindless cries, gape wide their eyes and mouths." They took "those turbulent seethings, those emotional surges from the innermost being—that is to say, that vague turmoil of the soul's bodily understructures—to be the language of the eternal by which all men can be united."

This ironic comment is aimed not only at music; it goes deeper, to *music's lyrical essence*, to that bewitchment that feeds festivals and massacres alike and turns individuals into ecstatic mobs. In this exasperation with the lyrical, Musil reminds me of Franz Kafka who, in his novels, abhors any emotional gesticulation (this sets him radically apart from the German expressionists) and who, he says so himself, writes *Amerika* in opposition to "style overflowing with feeling"; Kafka thereby reminds me of Hermann Broch, who was allergic to "the spirit of opera," especially to the opera of Wagner (that Wagner so adored by Baudelaire, by Proust), which he calls the very model of kitsch (a "genius kitsch," he said); and Broch thereby reminds me of Witold Gombrowicz who, in his famous text *Against Poets*, is reacting to both the deep-rooted Romanticism of Polish literature and to poetry taken as the untouchable goddess of Western modernism.

Kafka, Musil, Broch, Gombrowicz . . . Did they make for a group, a school, a movement? No; they were all solitaries. I have often called them "the Pleiades of Central Europe's great novelists," and, indeed, like the stars in the constellation, each of them was surrounded by empty space, each of them distant from the others. It seemed all the more remarkable that their work should express a similar aesthetic orientation: they were all *poets* of the novel, which is to say people impassioned by the form and by its newness; concerned for the intensity of each word, each phrase; seduced by the imagination as it tries to move beyond the borders of "realism"; but at the same time impervious to seduction by the *lyrical;* hostile to the transformation of the novel into personal confession; allergic to the ornamentalization of prose; entirely focused on the real world. They all of them conceived the novel to be a great *antilyrical poetry*.

Kitsch and vulgarity

The word "kitsch" was born in Munich in the mid-nineteenth century; it describes the syrupy leftover of the great Romantic period. But Hermann Broch, who saw the connection between Romanticism and kitsch as one of inverse proportions, may have come closer to the truth: according to him, kitsch was the dominant style of the nineteenth century (in Germany and in Central Europe), with a few great Romantic works separating out from it as phenomena of exception. People who experienced the secular tyranny of kitsch (an opera-tenor kind of tyranny) feel particular irritation at the rosy veil thrown over reality, at the immodest exhibition of hearts forever deeply moved, at the "bread drenched in perfume" Musil speaks of; kitsch long ago became a very precise concept in Central Europe, where it stands as the *supreme aesthetic evil*.

I do not suspect the French modernists of succumbing to the lure of sentimentality and pomp; but without a long exposure to kitsch, they had not had occasion to develop a hypersensitive aversion to it. Only in 1960, thus a hundred years after it appeared in Germany, was the word first used in France; yet the French translators of Broch's essays in 1966 and of Hannah Arendt in 1974 both still avoided the term "kitsch" and instead used the translation *art de pacotille* (cheap art), thereby rendering incomprehensible their authors' thinking.

Rereading Stendhal's *Lucien Leuwen*, the fashionable drawing-room conversations, I pause over the key words that catch the various attitudes of the participants: *vanité; vulgaire; esprit* (wit—"that vitriolic acid eating at everything"); *ridicule, politesse* ("infinite manners, no feeling"); *bien-pensante* (right thinking). And I ask myself: What is the word that expresses the worst *aesthetic reprobation* the way the notion of kitsch expresses it for me? It finally comes to me: it is the word *vulgaire, vulgarité*. "M. Du Poirier was a creature of the utmost vulgarity, a man who seemed proud of his crass, overfamiliar ways; thus does a pig wallow in mud with a kind of voluptuous pleasure that is insolent toward the spectator."

Scorn for the vulgar inhabited the drawing rooms of the time just as it does in today's. To recall its etymology: "vulgar" comes from *vulgus*, "people"; "vulgar" is what pleases the people; a democrat, a man of the left, a battler for human rights, is obliged to love the people; but he is free to disdain it haughtily for what he finds vulgar.

After the political anathema Sartre had cast upon Camus, after the Nobel Prize that brought down jealousy and hatred on him, Camus felt very uncomfortable among the Paris intellectuals. I am told that he was further distressed by labels of "vulgarity" attached to him personally: his lowly origins, his illiterate mother; his situation as a *pied noir* (a Frenchman from Algeria) sympathetic to other *pieds noirs*—people so "overfamiliar" (so "crass"); the lightweight philosophy of his essays; and so on. Reading the articles in which such lynching occurred, I note this passage: Camus is "a peasant dressed up in his Sunday best, . . . a man of the people with his gloves in his hand and his hat still on his head, stepping for the first time into the drawing room. The other guests turn away, they know whom they are dealing with." The metaphor is eloquent: not only did he not know what he was supposed to think (he disparaged progress and sympathized with the Algerian French) but, graver yet, he behaved awkwardly in the drawing room (in the actual or figurative sense): he was vulgar.

In France there is no harsher aesthetic reprobation than this. Reprobation that is sometimes justified but that also strikes at the best: at Rabelais. And at Flaubert. "The primary characteristic of *Sentimental Education*," said the famous writer Barbey d'Aurevilly on its publication, "is vulgarity, first and foremost. In our view, the world already has enough vulgar folk, vulgar minds, vulgar things, without further adding to the overwhelming number of these disgusting vulgarities."

I recall the early weeks of my emigration. As Stalinism had already been unanimously condemned, people readily understood the tragedy the Russian occupation meant for my country, and they saw me as wrapped in an aura of respectable sadness. I remember sitting at a bar with a Parisian intellectual who had given me much support and help. It was our first meeting in Paris and, hovering in the air above us, I could see grand words: persecution, gulag, freedom, banishment from the native land, courage, resistance, totalitarianism, police terror. Eager to banish the kitsch of those solemn specters, I started describing how the fact of being followed, of having police listening-devices in our apartments, had taught us the delectable art of the hoax. A friend and I had switched apartments, and names as well; he, a big womanizer who was regally indifferent to the microphones, had pulled off some of his finest exploits in my studio. Given that the trickiest moment in any amorous adventure is the breakup, my emigration worked out perfectly for him: one fine day the girls and the ladies arrived to find the apartment locked and my name gone from the door, while I was sending off little farewell cards from Paris, with my own signature, to seven women I had never seen.

I'd meant to amuse this man who was dear to me, but his face gradually darkened until finally he said, with the sound of the guillotine dropping, "I don't find that funny."

We remained friendly, but we were never friends. The memory of our first encounter serves as a key to understand our long-unacknowledged difference: What held us apart was the clash of two aesthetic attitudes: the man allergic to kitsch collides with the man allergic to vulgarity.

Antimodern modernism

"One must be absolutely modern," wrote Arthur Rimbaud. Some sixty years later Gombrowicz was not so sure. In *Ferdydurke* (written in Poland in 1937) the Youngblood family is dominated by the daughter, a "modern highschool girl." She is mad for the telephone; she disdains the classical authors; when a gentleman comes to call she "merely looks at him and, sticking a small wrench between her teeth with her right hand, offers him her left with total nonchalance."

Her mother is modern, too; she works with a "Committee for the Protection of Newborns," is active against the death penalty and for civil liberties; "ostentatiously offhand, she sets out for the toilet" and emerges from it "prouder than she went in"; as she grows older, modernity becomes the more indispensable to her as the sole "substitute for youth."

And papa? He too is modern; he thinks nothing but does everything to please his daughter and his wife.

In *Ferdydurke*, Gombrowicz got at the fundamental shift that occurred during the twentieth century: until then mankind was divided in two—those who defended the status quo and those who sought to change it. Then the acceleration of History took effect: whereas in the past man had lived continuously in the same setting, in a society that changed only very slowly, now the moment arrived when he suddenly began to feel History moving beneath his feet, like a rolling sidewalk: the *status quo* was in motion! All at once, being comfortable with the *status quo* was the same thing as being comfortable with History on the move!

Which meant that a person could be both progressive and conformist, conservative and rebel, at the same time!

Attacked as a reactionary by Sartre and his bunch, Camus got off the famous remark about people who had "merely set down their armchairs facing in the direction of History"; Camus was right, but he did not know that the precious chair was on wheels, and that for

some time already everyone had been pushing it forward—the modern high school girls, their mamas, their papas, as well as all the activists against the death penalty and all the members of the Committee for the Protection of Newborns and, of course, all the politicians, who, as they pushed the chair along, kept their laughing faces turned to the public running along behind them and also laughing, knowing very well that only a person who *delights* in being modern is genuinely modern.

That was when a certain number of Rimbaud's heirs grasped this extraordinary thing: today the only modernism worthy of the name is antimodern modernism.

Chapter 28

Nirvana Tanoukhi

THE SCALE OF WORLD LITERATURE (2008)

NIRVANA TANOUKHI (B. 1976) IS an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She earned her PhD from Stanford University and has held a postdoctoral position at Harvard University. She has translated works of fiction from Arabic to English, co-edited *Immanuel Wallerstein and the Problem of the World: System, Scale, Culture*, and contributed an article on African literature to *The Routledge Companion to World Literature*.

In "The Scale of World Literature", she draws attention to how the concept of world literature may not deliver a new perspective on global literature if the way the world itself is conceptualized is not scrutinized critically. Following in the tracks of Franco Moretti's interest in the geography of the novel, Tanoukhi investigates the uses of cartographic metaphors, reacting against the seemingly solid insights of mapmaking by drawing attention to how different scales make a difference.

Cultural geographies are not merely given, but rather are constructed and used for different purposes. Tanoukhi points to how different such geographies appear depending on the position of the observer, in particular whether one looks at a national or regional cultural geography from within or from the outside. This is particularly important when dealing with areas which have traditionally been labelled as part of the periphery of world literature, such as Africa, and where the mapping of the cultural geography should not only be based on the concepts of the center. This is where the idea of the postcolonial novel has worked to produce overly simplified descriptions of literatures which do not take literature's own way of producing different scales into account.

Tanoukhi does not provide easy solutions to the problems she discusses, but expands and refines the debate on how to handle the immense complexity world literature presents with a request to reflect on the many, mostly implicit, uses of scale involved in the presentation of arguments about the geography of world literature.

Nirvana Tanoukhi, "The Scale of World Literature," *New Literary History* 39 (2008) 3–4: 599–617.