



Western Literature: Concepts and Questions

Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Argentine Writer
and Tradition' (1943)

Milan Kundera, 'Die Weltliteratur' (2005)

Pascale Casanova, 'Literature as World'
(2005)

introduction

- What is ‘western literature’?
- What does ‘western’ add to ‘literature’?
 - literature: not only a corpus of texts
 - literature as ‘cultural good’ associated with taste, sensibility, tradition...
 - ‘the West’: sum of all literatures of “the West”?
 - What is the logic behind literary history (in terms of selection, principles of inclusion, etc.)?

framing the question:

Pascale Casanova: “Literature as a World”

- literature as a semi-autonomous ‘world’, ‘field’, ‘sphere’ that follows its own logic and rules:

“So: **another world**, whose divisions and frontiers are relatively independent of political and linguistic borders. And with its own laws, its own history, its specific revolts and revolutions; a market where non-market values are traded, within a non-economic economy; and measured, as we shall see, by an aesthetic scale of time. This world of letters functions invisibly for the most part, save for those most distant from its great centres or most deprived of its resources, who can see more clearly the forms of violence and domination that operate within it.” (middle pg. 72)

Pascale Casanova (1959-2018)

- literary critic and scholar
- research on 'literary domination'
 - <https://iwl.fas.harvard.edu/news/major-french-literary-critic-pascale-casanova-dies-59>
- How do writers from small literatures respond to literary domination?
 - *Beckett, l'abstracteur* (1997)
 - *Kafka en colère* (2015)
 - *La république mondiale des lettres* (1999)



Casanova, “Literature as World” in *New Left Review* (2005)

theoretical sources behind the concept “world literary space” (pg. 80):

- Pierre Bourdieu: ‘field theory’
 - competition – ‘symbolical’ capital – literary market
- Fernand Braudel & Immanuel Wallerstein: ‘world-system-analysis’
 - center-periphery dynamic

Western literature as a space of literary wars and literary domination

- struggles for literary recognition
- literature produces value on a microlevel (ex. prestige writer) and a macrolevel (ex. prestige national literature, or as translated world literature)
- transnational approach

“the long and merciless war of literature”

origin ‘world literary space’: 19th-century nationalism:

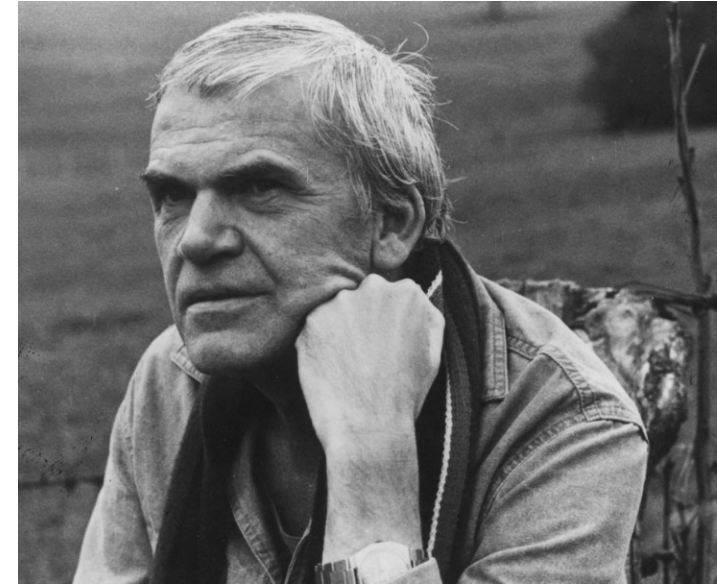
- national literatures vying for visibility in the ‘World Republic of Letters’
- inequalities: the oldest traditions have more weight
- ‘forms of domination’ (86-87): linguistic, political, or literary
- ! hypothesis: a ‘tool that should be tested by concrete research’ (72)

Kundera & Borges?

- ‘belonging’ to tradition: national? European? Western?

Milan Kundera (born 1929)

- Czech-born, living in France since 1975
- naturalized to French citizen
- oeuvre in Czech and French
- French nationality: French writer? Czech Writer?
- regrets 'western misconceptions' of Czech literature



Kundera, *Die Weltliteratur* (2005)

Europe? small nations vs. large nations

nations & nationalism

‘irreparable inequality’ (290-291):

- political inequality
- language inequality

Goethe's *Weltliteratur*

"National literature no longer means much these days, we are entering the era of *Weltliteratur*" (qtd. in Kundera 291)

= a new post-national perspective

Goethe's approval of "a [literary] market where all nations offer their wares" (qtd. in Casanova 83)

- ! for a critical reading, see Casanova and Gloria Fisk

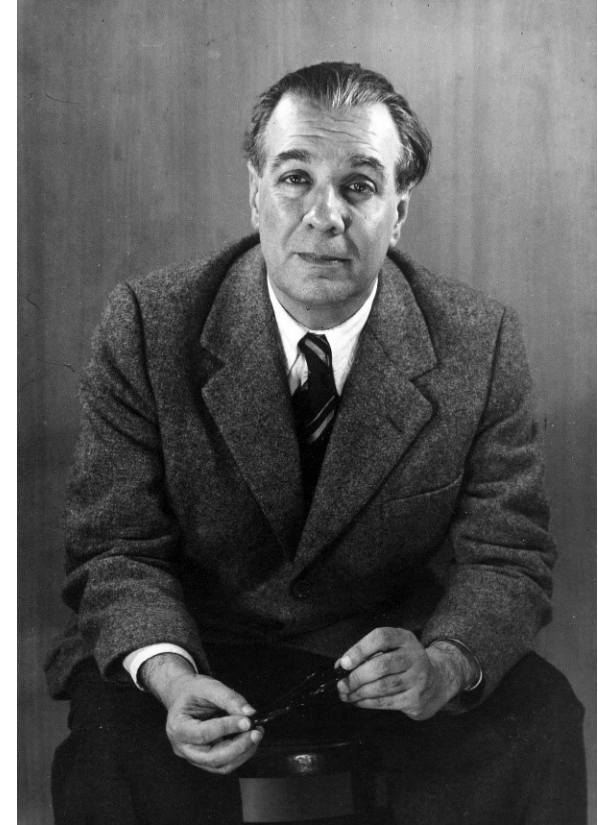
Kundera's idealist reading of *Weltliteratur*

- world literature as an antidote to the problem of *provincialism*: "the inability (or the refusal) to see one's own culture in the large context" (292)
- provincialism of the small nations
- provincialism of the large nations

world literature as an antidote to "the man of the East"

Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986)

- Argentina
- writer of fiction and essays, professor, research librarian, translator
- metafiction: often about literary history and tradition
 - Ex. “Pierre Menard, Autor del Quijote”



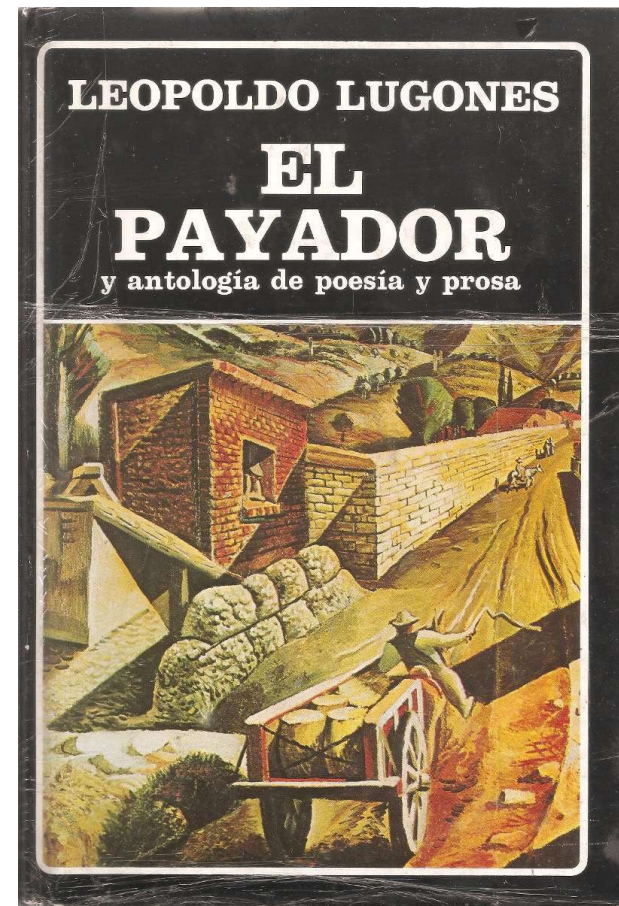
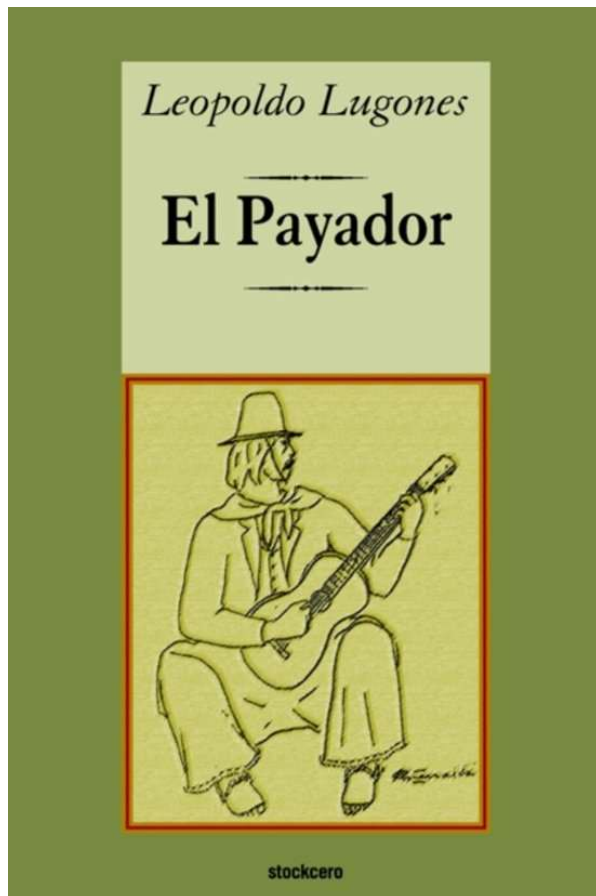
The Problem of Argentine Tradition (1943)

- “...my skepticism is not related to the difficulty or impossibility of resolving the problem, but to its very existence. I think we are faced with a rhetorical theme, suitable for pathetic elaboration, rather than a true cerebral difficulty.” (392)
- three ‘responses’
 - the constructed ‘authenticity’ of *gauchesco* literature
 - the supposed ‘dependence’ on the colonial past
 - the supposed ‘distance’ from Europe

tradition: *payadores*, *gauchos*, and *gauchesco* poetry

- constructing a past: building “symbolical capital”
 - white colonizers: criollos & gauchos
 - Leopoldo Lugones in *El payador* (1916): “*Martin Fierro*... should be for us what the Homeric poems were for the Greeks” (392)
 - Ricardo Rojas in *Historia de la literatura argentina* (1917-1922): “studies the poetry of the *gauchescos*... and finds its origins in the poetry of the rural improvisational singers known as *payadores*, that is, the spontaneous poetry of the gauchos themselves” (392)
- Borges: “gauchesco poetry... is as artificial as any other literary genre” (393)

‘National’



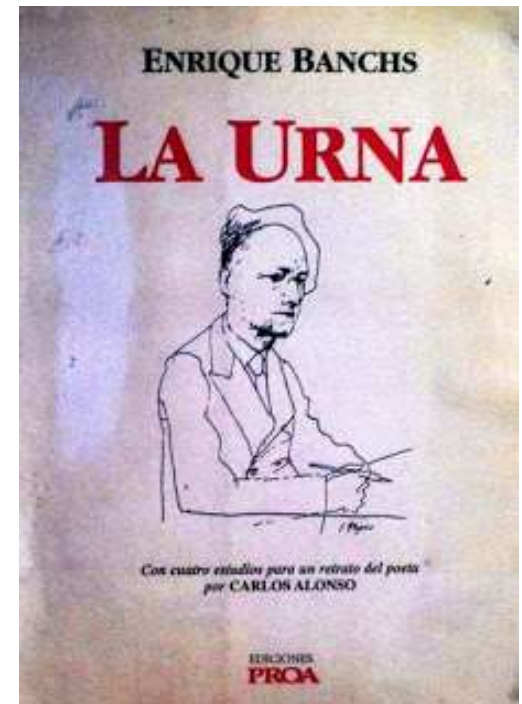
‘not national’? *La urna* (1911) by Banchs, “Poem 99”:

Todo esto es bueno y tiene misteriosa
gracia. Y alrededor todo es dulzura
y rebosa alegría cual rebosa
la penumbrosa pérgola fresca.

Como es su deber mágico dan flores
los árboles. El sol en los tejados
y en las ventanas brilla. Ruiseñores
quieren decir que están enamorados...

¡Dios mío, todo está como antes era!
Se va el invierno, viene primavera,
y todos son felices; y la vida

pasa en silencio, amada y bendecida;
nada dice que no, nada, jamás...
pero yo sé que no la veré más.



Why think less of “imported” styles?

Ricardo Güiraldes, *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926):

- creation of a ‘national’ tradition: gaucho themes & landscapes (395)
- but also evidence of international influences

see Casanova:

- = formal history of “borrow[ing] from the center” (89)
- = “expropriation of literary capital” (88)

Borges: “I think Racine would not have begun to understand anyone who would deny him his right to the title of French poet for having sought out Greek and Latin subjects” (394)

the solution to the problem of Argentina's literary tradition

- “Against the conviction ‘that we Argentineans are cut off from the past; that there has been some kind of rupture between ourselves and Europe.’ According to this singular point of view, we Argentines are as if in the first days of creation; our search for European subject matters and techniques is an illusion, an error; we must understand that we are essentially alone, and cannot play at being European” (396)
- “I believe that our tradition is the whole of Western culture, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western nation or another may have” (396)

Food for further thought on ‘world literary space’:

- “Each writer’s position must necessarily be a double one, twice defined: each writer is situated once according to the position he or she occupies in a national space, and then once again according to the place this occupies within the world space” (Casanova 81).
- Can ‘borrowings’ - outward signs of literary domination - also ‘emancipate’ local literatures?
 - Rubén Dario and *modernismo*?
 - Gertrude Stein and modernism?
 -
- How objective are measures for literary value? (ex. Nobel Prize? Greenwich Meridian of Literature? Etc.)
- Etc.

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Borges, Kundera and Casanova touch upon many themes that will re-emerge during our discussions of more theoretical texts

Casanova (2005) and theories of World literature

Cf. the two sessions devoted to World Literature, with other texts from the first two decades of the twenty-first century which sometimes engage (explicitly or implicitly) with her ideas about a 'World Republic of Letters'.

Borges (1943)

- “I believe that our tradition is *the whole of Western culture*, and I also believe that we have a right to this tradition, a greater right than that which the inhabitants of one Western nation or another may have”
- Is Western culture a ‘whole’?
- Is that ‘whole’ best seen by (non-)Westerners/outsideers? (and is Argentina outside the West?)
- Compare with T.S. Eliot: “It is the final perfection, the consummation of an American to become, not an Englishman, but a European – something which no born European, no person of any European nationality, can become.” (1918)
- 1918 / 1943: moments of major crisis in ‘the West’

Borges

- According to Thorstein Veblen, “Jews are prominent in Western culture because they act within that culture and at the same time do not feel bound to it by any devotion ... We can say the same of the Irish in English culture’
→ Just how ‘Western’ are theorists of Western/European literature/culture like Eric Auerbach, T.S. Eliot, Harold Bloom?

Borges

- “According to this singular point of view, we Argentines are as if in the first days of creation: our search for European subject matters and techniques is an illusion, an error”
- “African-American and Chicano literary activists go even further in asserting their freedom from any anguish of contamination [the literary influence of the Western canon] whatsoever: each of them is Adam early in the morning” (Harold Bloom)

Borges

- “I would maintain that in the use of these conventional images, in these incongruous tiled roofs and nightingales, although neither the architecture nor the ornithology is Argentine, there is the Argentine reserve, the Argentine reticence”

→ The “vocabulary, categories, and codes [of English] are felt to be inadequate or inappropriate to describe the fauna, the physical and geographical conditions, or the cultural practices they have developed in a new land. The Canadian poet Joseph Howe, for instance, plucks his picture of a moose from some repository of English nursery rhyme romanticism:

... the gay moose in jocund gambol springs,
Cropping the foliage Nature round him flings. ”

(The Empire Writes Back)

Kundera

- “Europe has not managed to view its literature as a historical unit”

→ Despite calls and efforts by the likes of Ernst Robert Curtius and T.S. Eliot? (e.g. “the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order” – T.S. Eliot)

Kundera on 'provincialism'

→ Also a word that recurs as a pejorative term in the writings of e.g. Curtius and Eliot.

Kundera's French canon

A very male construct? (pp. 293-94)

How masculine are the Western/European canon and Western/European literature?

Kundera on the (shifting) boundaries between East and West, on the “European Orient” and “the easternmost edge of the West”

- Is Western literature / culture defined in opposition to an ‘Orient’ (cf. Edward Said’s *Orientalism*)? How much does that ‘Orient’ include?

