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LITERATURE AS A WORLD

Customer: God made the world in six days and you, you can't make me a damn pair of trousers in six months!

Tailor: But sir, look at the world and look at your trousers.

quoted by Samuel Beckett

Far, far from you world history unfolds, the world history of your soul.

Franz Kafka

THREE QUESTIONS. Is it possible to re-establish the lost bond between literature, history and the world, while still maintaining a full sense of the irreducible singularity of literary texts? Second, can literature itself be conceived as a world? And if so, might an exploration of its territory help us to answer question number one?

Put differently: is it possible to find the conceptual means with which to oppose the central postulate of internal, text-based literary criticism—the total rupture between text and world? Can we propose any theoretical and practical tools that could combat the governing principle of the autonomy of the text, or the alleged independence of the linguistic sphere? To date, the answers given to this crucial question, from postcolonial theory among others, seem to me to have established only a limited connection between the two supposedly incommensurate domains. Post-colonialism posits a direct link between literature and history, one that is exclusively political. From this, it moves to an *external* criticism that runs the risk of reducing the literary to the political, imposing a series of annexations or short-circuits, and often passing in silence over the actual aesthetic, formal or stylistic characteristics that actually ‘make’ literature.

I want to propose a hypothesis that would move beyond this division between internal and external criticism. Let us say that a mediating

space exists between literature and the world: a parallel territory, relatively autonomous from the political domain, and dedicated as a result to questions, debates, inventions of a specifically literary nature. Here, struggles of all sorts—political, social, national, gender, ethnic—come to be refracted, diluted, deformed or transformed according to a literary logic, and in literary forms. Working from this hypothesis, while trying to envisage all its theoretical and practical consequences, should permit us to set out on a course of criticism that would be both internal and external; in other words, a criticism that could give a unified account of, say, the evolution of poetic forms, or the aesthetics of the novel, and their connection to the political, economic and social world—including telling us how, by a very long (indeed historical) process, the link gets broken in the most autonomous regions of this space.

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 to those most distant from its great centres or most deprived of its resources, who can see more clearly than others the forms of violence and domination that operate within it.

Let us call this mediating area the ‘world literary space’. It is no more than a tool that should be tested by concrete research, an instrument that might provide an account of the logic and history of literature, without falling into the trap of total autonomy. It is also a ‘hypothetical model’ in Chomsky’s sense—a body of statements whose working out (if risky) may itself help to formulate the object of description; that is, an internally coherent set of propositions.¹ Working from a model should permit a certain freedom from the immediate ‘given’. It should, on the contrary, allow us to construct every case afresh; and to show with each one that it does not exist in isolation, but is a particular instance of the possible, an element in a group or family, which we could not have seen without having previously formulated an abstract model of all possibilities.

This conceptual tool is not ‘world literature’ itself—that is, a body of literature expanded to a world scale, whose documentation and, indeed, existence remains problematic—but a *space*: a set of interconnected

¹ Noam Chomsky, *Current Issues in Linguistic Theory*, The Hague 1964, p. 105ff.

positions, which must be thought and described in relational terms. At stake are not the modalities of analysing literature on a world scale, but the conceptual means for thinking literature *as* a world.

In his story, 'The Figure in the Carpet'—turning as it does on the aims of interpretation in literature—Henry James deploys the beautiful metaphor of the Persian rug. Viewed casually or too close up, this appears an indecipherable tangle of arbitrary shapes and colours; but from the right angle, the carpet will suddenly present the attentive observer with 'the one right combination' of 'superb intricacy'—an ordered set of motifs which can only be understood in relation to each other, and which only become visible when perceived in their totality, in their reciprocal dependence and mutual interaction.² Only when the carpet is seen as a configuration—to use Foucault's term in *Les Mots et les choses*—ordering the shapes and colours can its regularities, variations, repetitions be understood; both its coherence and its internal relationships. Each figure can be grasped only in terms of the position it occupies within the whole, and its interconnections with all the others.

The Persian carpet metaphor perfectly encapsulates the approach offered here: to take a different perspective, shifting the ordinary vantage-point on literature. Not to focus just on the global coherence of the carpet, but rather to show that, starting from a grasp of the overall pattern of the designs, it will be possible to understand each motif, each colour in its most minute detail; that is, each text, each individual author, on the basis of their relative position within this immense structure. My project, then, is to restore the coherence of the global structure within which texts appear, and which can only be seen by taking the route seemingly farthest from them: through the vast, invisible territory which I have called the 'World Republic of Letters'. But only in order to return to the texts themselves, and to provide a new tool for reading them.

Birth of a world

This literary space did not, of course, spring into being in its present configuration. It emerged as the product of a historical process, from which it grew progressively more autonomous. Without going into detail, we can say that it appeared in Europe in the 16th century, France

² Henry James, *The Figure in the Carpet and Other Stories*, Harmondsworth 1986, p. 381.

and England forming its oldest regions. It was consolidated and enlarged into central and eastern Europe during the 18th and especially the 19th centuries, propelled by Herderian national theory. It expanded throughout the 20th century, notably through the still-ongoing decolonization process: manifestos proclaiming the right to literary existence or independence continue to appear, often linked to movements for national self-determination. Although the space of literature has been constituted more or less everywhere in the world, its unification across the whole planet is far from complete.

The mechanisms through which this literary universe functions are the exact opposite of what is ordinarily understood by 'literary globalization'—better defined as a short-term boost to publishers' profits in the most market-oriented and powerful centres through the marketing of products intended for rapid, 'de-nationalized' circulation.³ The success of this type of book among educated Western layers—representing no more than a shift from train-station to airport literature—has fostered belief in an ongoing literary pacification process: a progressive normalization and standardization of themes, forms, languages and story-types across the globe. In reality, structural inequalities within the literary world give rise to specific series of struggles, rivalries and contests over literature itself. Indeed, it is through these collisions that the ongoing unification of literary space becomes visible.

Stockholm and Greenwich

One objective indicator of the existence of this world literary space is the (almost) unanimous belief in the universality of the Nobel Prize for literature. The significance attributed to this award, the peculiar diplomacy involved, the national expectations engendered, the colossal renown it bestows; even (above all?) the annual criticism of the Swedish jury for its alleged lack of objectivity, its supposed political prejudices, its aesthetic errors—all conspire to make this annual canonization a global engagement for the protagonists of literary space. The Nobel Prize is today one of the few truly international literary consecrations, a unique laboratory for the designation and definition of what is universal in literature.⁴ The

³ See André Schiffrin, *The Business of Books: How the International Conglomerates Took over Publishing and Changed the Way we Read*, London and New York 2000.

⁴ See Kjell Espmark, *Le Prix Nobel. Histoire intérieure d'une consécration littéraire*, Paris 1986.

echoes it creates each year, the expectations aroused, the beliefs stirred all reaffirm the existence of a literary world stretching across virtually the entire planet, with its own mode of celebration, both autonomous—not subject, or at least not directly, to political, linguistic, national, nationalist or commercial criteria—and global. In this sense, the Nobel Prize is a prime, objective indicator of the existence of a world literary space.⁵

Another indicator—less readily observable—is the appearance of a specific measurement of time, common to all the players. Each new entrant must recognize at the outset a reference point, a norm against which he or she will be measured; all positions are located relative to a centre in which the literary present is determined. I propose to call this the Greenwich Meridian of literature. Just as the imaginary line, arbitrarily chosen in order to determine the lines of longitude, contributes to the real organization of the world and makes it possible to measure distances and assess positions across the surface of the globe, so the literary meridian allows us to gauge the distance from the centre of the protagonists within literary space. It is the place where the measurement of literary time—that is, the assessment of aesthetic modernity—is crystallized, contested, elaborated. What is considered modern here, at a given moment, will be declared to be the ‘present’: texts that will ‘make their mark’, capable of modifying the current aesthetic norms. These works will serve, for a time at least, as the units of measurement within a specific chronology, models of comparison for subsequent productions.

To be decreed ‘modern’ is one of the most difficult forms of recognition for writers outside the centre, and the object of violent and bitter competition. Octavio Paz brilliantly set out the terms of this strange struggle in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, the title of which is, precisely, *In Search of the Present*. He describes his entire personal and poetic trajectory as a frantic—and successful, as his receipt of the highest award testifies—search for a literary present, from which he understood early on that, as a Mexican, he was structurally very distant.⁶ Texts granted modern status create the chronology of literary history, according to a logic that can be

⁵ The recent award of the prize to the Austrian Elfriede Jelinek—unclassifiable author of violent and experimental prose works and plays, with a radical, and radically pessimist, political and feminist critical stance—is another example of the Swedish jury’s total independence in making its choices and conducting its ‘literary policy’.

⁶ ‘The modern was outside, we had to import it’, he writes, for example. Paz, *La búsqueda del presente. Conferencia Nobel*, San Diego 1990.

quite different from those of other social worlds. For example, once Joyce's *Ulysses* had been consecrated as a 'modern' work by Valéry Larbaud's 1929 French translation, winning the reviews and critical attention that had so far eluded it in English, it became—and remains, in certain regions of literary space—one of the measures of novelistic modernity.

Temporalities

Modernity is, of course, an unstable entity: a locus of permanent struggle, a decree destined for more or less rapid obsolescence, and one of the principles of change at the heart of the world literary space. All those who aspire to modernity, or who struggle for monopoly control over its attribution, are engaged in the constant classification and de-classification of works—with texts apt to become former moderns or new classics. The recurrent use of temporal metaphors in criticism, airily declaring works to be 'passé' or 'outmoded', archaic or innovative, anachronistic or imbued with 'the spirit of the times', is one of the clearest signs of these mechanisms' functioning. This explains, at least in part, the permanence of the term 'modernity' in literary movements and proclamations at least since 1850—from the different European and Latin American modernisms, through Italian and Russian futurisms, up to the various postmodernisms. The innumerable claims to 'newness'—'Nouveau Roman', 'Nouvelle Vague' and so on—adhere to the same principle.

Owing to the inherent precariousness of the principle of 'modernity', a work declared modern is doomed to become obsolete unless elevated to the category of 'classic'. Through this process, some works can escape the vagaries of opinion and disputes over their relative value. In literary terms, a classic stands above temporal competition (and spatial inequality). On the other hand, practices that are remote from the literary present, itself established by the whole system of consecrations at the centre, will be declared long out of date. For example, the naturalist novel is still being produced in the zones furthest from the Greenwich Meridian (whether peripheral literary spaces or the most commercial regions of the centre), even though it has not been considered 'modern' by the autonomous authorities for a very long time. The Brazilian critic Antonio Candido observed:

what demands attention in Latin America is the way aesthetically anachronistic works were considered valid . . . This is what occurred with naturalism

in the novel, which arrived a little late and has prolonged itself until now with no essential break in continuity . . . So, when naturalism was already only a survival of an outdated genre in Europe, among us it could still be an ingredient of legitimate literary formulas, such as the social novel of the 1930s and 40s.⁷

This type of aesthetic-temporal struggle is often waged through intermediaries who themselves have an interest in the 'discovery' of authors from abroad. The Norwegian Ibsen was consecrated as one of the greatest European dramatists more or less simultaneously in Paris and London, around 1890. His work, labelled 'realist', overturned all theatrical practice, writing, decor, language and dialogue, leading to a genuine revolution in European theatre. The international consecration of a playwright from a country that had gained independence only a short time before, and whose language was seldom spoken (and therefore seldom translated) in France and England, was secured through the actions of a few mediators—Bernard Shaw in London, André Antoine and Lugné-Poe in Paris—who themselves planned to 'modernize' theatre in their respective countries, going beyond the stale, established norms of vaudeville and bourgeois drama which held sway in London and Paris, and making their own names as dramatists or producers.⁸ In the Dublin of 1900, Joyce in his turn made use of the prodigious aesthetic and thematic novelty of Ibsen's work in his struggle against Irish theatre, which threatened, in his view, to become 'much too Irish'.

Much the same applies to Faulkner. Having been lauded from the 1930s on as one of the most innovative novelists of the age,⁹ Faulkner himself became a measure of novelistic innovation after receiving the Nobel Prize in 1950. Following his international consecration, Faulkner's work played the role of a 'temporal accelerator' for a wide range of novelists of different periods, in countries structurally comparable, in economic and

⁷ Antonio Candido, 'Literature and Underdevelopment', in *On Literature and Society*, trans. Howard Becker, Princeton 1995, pp. 128–9.

⁸ The same 'self-interested use' of the foreign explains the case of the French Romantics cited by Christopher Prendergast—the former 'made use of' Shakespeare and the English theatrical tradition to establish themselves in the French space. See 'Negotiating World Literature', *NLR* 8, March–April 2001, pp. 110–1.

⁹ Sartre's famous article on *The Sound and the Fury*, 'La temporalité chez Faulkner', appeared in the *Nouvelle revue française* in June–July 1939; reprinted in *Situations I*, Paris 1947, pp. 65–75.

cultural terms, to the American South. All of them openly announced their use (at least in a technical sense) of this Faulknerian accelerator; among them were Juan Benet in 1950s Spain, Gabriel García Márquez in Colombia and Mario Vargas Llosa in Peru in the 1950s and 1960s, Kateb Yacine in 1960s Algeria, António Lobo-Antunes in 1970s Portugal, Edouard Glissant in the French Antilles of the 1980s, and so on.

Seeing through borders

But why start from the hypothesis of a world literary space and not a more restricted one, which would have been easier to demarcate—a regional or linguistic field, for instance? Why choose to begin by constructing the largest possible domain, the one entailing most risks? Because to illuminate the workings of this space, and in particular the forms of domination exerted within it, implies the rejection of established national categories and divisions; indeed, demands a trans- or inter-national mode of thought. Once we adopt this world perspective, we can immediately see that national boundaries, or linguistic ones, simply screen out the real effects of literary domination and inequality. The reason for this is simple: literatures the whole world over were formed on the national model created and promoted by Germany at the end of the 18th century. The national movement of literatures, which accompanied the formation of Europe's political spaces from the beginning of the 19th century, led to an essentialization of literary categories and the belief that the frontiers of literary space necessarily coincided with national borders. Nations were considered to be separate, self-enclosed units, each irreducible to any other; from within their autarchic specificity, these entities produced literary objects whose 'historical necessity' is inscribed within a national horizon. Stefan Collini has demonstrated the tautology underlying the definition of 'national literature' for the British—or rather, English—case: 'only those authors who display the putative characteristics are recognized as authentically English, a category whose definition relies upon the examples provided in the literature written by just those authors.'¹⁰

The national division of literatures leads to a form of astigmatism. An analysis of Irish literary space between 1890 and 1930 that ignored

¹⁰ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain, 1850–1930*, Oxford 1991, p. 357.

events unfolding both in London (the political, colonial and literary power, in opposition to which the Irish space is constructed) and in Paris (alternative recourse and politically neutral literary power), or passed in silence over the trajectories, exiles, and various forms of recognition offered in the different capitals, would be condemned to a partial and distorted view of the actual stakes and power relations facing Irish protagonists. Similarly, a study of the formation of the German literary space from the end of the 18th century that overlooked its intensely competitive relationship with France would run the risk of completely misunderstanding its structuring engagements.

This is not to suggest that inter-national literary power relations are the only explanatory factors in literary texts, or the sole interpretative instruments we can apply to them; still less that literary complexity should be reduced to this dimension. Many other variables—national (that is, internal to the national literary field), psychological, psychoanalytic, formal or formalist—have a role to play.¹¹ The point is rather to demonstrate, in both structural and historical terms, how many variables, conflicts or forms of soft violence have remained undetected and unexplained due to the invisibility of this world structure. Critical writing on Kafka, for example, is often limited either to the biographical study of his psychology or to descriptions of Prague in the 1900s. In this case, the biographical and national ‘screen’ prevents us from seeing the author’s place within other, larger worlds: within the space of the Jewish nationalist movements then developing across central and eastern Europe; in debates between Bundists and Yiddishists; as one of the dominated in the German linguistic and cultural space, and so on. The national

¹¹ *Pace* Christopher Prendergast, I do not argue that the ideas of ‘nation’ or ‘national’ must necessarily be linked to that of ‘literature’. Indeed, it was rather to distinguish them that my *République mondiale des lettres* (1999) proposed the notion of ‘national literary spaces’, i.e., sub-spaces which are themselves located within the world literary universe. These sub-spaces vie with one another, through the struggles of writers, not for national (or nationalist) reasons, but instead for strictly literary stakes. That said, the degree of literary independence relative to national conflicts and ideologies has a strong correlation to the age of the sub-space. Here the example of Wordsworth—whose œuvre cannot of course be interpreted purely in terms of inter-national rivalry—is a perfect illustration of the fact that it is the oldest and best endowed national spaces which manage gradually to constitute an autonomous literature within their national enclosures, (relatively) independent of strictly literary stakes; that is, a depoliticized and (at least partially) denationalized space. See Prendergast, ‘Negotiating World Literature’, pp. 109–112.

filter acts as a kind of 'natural' frontier which prevents the analyst from considering the violence of transnational political and literary power relations as they impact upon the writer.

World space or world-system?

The hypothesis of a world space, functioning through a structure of domination that is, to some extent, independent of political, economic, linguistic and social forms, clearly owes a great deal to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of the 'field' and, more precisely, of the 'literary field'.¹² But the latter has so far been envisaged within a national framework, limited by the borders, historical traditions and capital accumulation processes of a specific nation-state. I found in Fernand Braudel's work, and his 'world-economy' in particular, the idea and the possibility of extending the analysis of these mechanisms onto the international plane.¹³

I would stress, though, the distinction between the 'world structure' that I am proposing and the 'world-system', most notably developed by Immanuel Wallerstein, which seems to me less appropriate to spaces of cultural production.¹⁴ A 'system' implies directly interactive relations between every element, every position. A structure, on the other hand,

¹² On this point see Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris 1992.

¹³ Fernand Braudel, *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme—XVe–XVIIIe siècles*, 3 vols, Paris 1979, vol. 3, especially ch. 1, pp. 12–33.

¹⁴ Franco Moretti takes up the world-system concept in his 'Conjectures on World Literature', NLR 1, January–February 2000, and in 'More Conjectures', NLR 20, March–April 2003. It allows him first of all to affirm the unity and foundational inequality of the literary system he seeks to describe, a crucial, boundary-defining affirmation to which I wholly subscribe. On the other hand, it seems to me that his use of the Braudelian opposition between 'centre' and 'periphery' tends to neutralize the (literary) violence involved, and so to obscure its inequality. Instead of this spatial dichotomy, I prefer an opposition between dominant and dominated, so as to reintroduce the fact of a power relation. Here I should make clear that this does not imply a mere division into two opposing categories but, on the contrary, a continuum of different situations in which the degree of dependence varies greatly. We could, for example, introduce the category put forward by Bourdieu of 'dominated among the dominants' to describe the situation of the (literarily) subordinate within Europe. The world-systems use of the term 'semi-periphery' to describe this type of intermediary position also seems to me to neutralize and euphemize the dominant–dominated relation, without providing a precise measure of the degree of dependence.

is characterized by objective relations, which can operate outside of any direct interaction. Moreover, in Wallerstein's terms, the forces and movements that struggle against the 'system' are considered 'anti-systemic'. In other words, they are external to the system and struggle against it from a position 'outside', which is sometimes hard to situate but can potentially be located on the 'periphery'. In an international structure of domination, the opposite is the case: the definitions of 'outside' and 'inside'—that is, the boundaries of the space—are themselves the focus of struggles. It is these struggles that constitute the space, that unify it and drive its expansion. Within this structure, means and methods are permanently disputed: who can be declared a writer, who can make legitimate aesthetic judgements (ones that will endow a given work with a specific value), the very definition of literature.

In other words, world literary space is not a sphere that is set above all the others, reserved exclusively for international writers, editors, critics—for literary actors manoeuvring in a supposedly de-nationalized world. It is not the sole preserve of great novelists, hugely successful authors, editorial produce devised for global sales. It is formed by all the inhabitants of the Republic of Letters, each of them differentially situated within their own national literary space. At the same time, 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 that this occupies within the world space. This dual position, inextricably national and international, explains why—contrary to what economic views of globalization would have us believe—international struggles take place and have their effects principally within national spaces; battles over the definition of literature, over technical or formal transformations and innovations, on the whole have national literary space as their arena.

The one great dichotomy is between national and international writers. This is the fracture which explains literary forms, types of aesthetic innovation, the adoption of genres. National and international writers fight with different weapons, for divergent aesthetic, commercial and editorial rewards—thus contributing, in different ways, to the accumulation of national literary resources required to enter the world space and compete inside it. Contrary to the conventional view, the national and

international are not separate spheres; they are two opposed stances, struggling within the same domain.¹⁵

This is why literary space cannot simply be imagined as a world geography that might be grasped merely through a description of its regions, its cultural and linguistic climates, centres of attraction and modes of circulation, as Braudel or Wallerstein have done for the economic world.¹⁶ Literary space should rather be conceived in terms of Cassirer's 'symbolic form', within which writers, readers, researchers, teachers, critics, publishers, translators and the rest read, write, think, debate, interpret; a structure which provides their—our—intellectual categories, and recreates its hierarchies and constraints in every mind, thus reinforcing the material aspects of its existence.¹⁷ Differentially so, according to one's position within it (national, linguistic, professional) at any given moment. Literary space in all its forms—texts, juries, editors, critics, writers, theorists, scholars—exists twice over: once in things and once in thought; that is, in the set of beliefs produced by these material relations and internalized by the players in literature's Great Game.

This is another thing that makes the structure so hard to visualize: it is impossible to place it at a distance, as a discrete and objectifiable phenomenon. More: any description or analysis of its workings has to go *against* the vast mass of conventional thought about literature, against the given scholarly or aesthetic facts, and to reconceive every notion, every category—influence, tradition, heritage, modernity, classics, value—in terms of the specific, internal workings of the world republic of letters.

Accumulating power

The primary characteristics of this world literary space are hierarchy and inequality. The skewed distribution of goods and values has been one

¹⁵ In offering a comparative table of the 'institutions of regional, national and world literature in India', Francesca Orsini suggests that there are different and mutually independent 'levels' or 'spheres' within a single national literary space. I would argue that we are dealing with positions that exist only in and through the relations of power in which they hold each other, and not with a rigid, immutable 'system'. See 'India in the Mirror of World Fiction', NLR 13, January–February 2002, p. 83.

¹⁶ See notably Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System*, 3 vols, New York 1980–88.

¹⁷ Ernst Cassirer, *La Philosophie des formes symboliques*, vol. 1, *Le langage*, Paris 1972, especially ch. 1, pp. 13–35.

of its constituting principles, since resources have historically accumulated within national frontiers. Goethe was the first to intuit the direct link between the appearance of a *Weltliteratur* and the emergence of a new economy founded on the specific struggles of international literary relations: a 'market where all nations offer their wares' and 'a general intellectual trade'.¹⁸ In fact, the world of literature provides a paradoxical sort of marketplace, constituted around a non-economic economy, and functioning according to its own set of values: for production and reproduction here are based on a belief in the 'objective' value of literary creations—works denominated as 'priceless'. The value produced by national or universal classics, great innovators, *poètes maudits*, rare texts, becomes concentrated in the capital cities in the form of national literary goods. The oldest regions, those longest established in the literary field, are the 'richest' in this sense—are credited with most power. Prestige is the quintessential form power takes in the literary universe: the intangible authority unquestioningly accorded to the oldest, noblest, most legitimate (the terms being almost synonymous) literatures, the most consecrated classics and most celebrated authors.¹⁹

The unequal distribution of literary resources is fundamental to the structure of the entire world literary space, organized as it is around two opposing poles. At the pole of greatest autonomy—that is, freest from political, national or economic constraints—stand the oldest spaces,²⁰ those most endowed with literary heritage and resources.²¹ These are generally European spaces, the first to enter into transnational literary competition, with large accumulated resources. At the pole of greatest heteronomy, where political, national and commercial criteria hold strongest sway, stand the newcomers, the spaces most lacking in literary resources; and the zones within the oldest regions that are most subordinate to commercial criteria. Each national space, meanwhile, is itself polarized by the same structure.

¹⁸ J. W. von Goethe, *Goethes Werke*, Hamburg 1981, vol. 12, pp. 362–3. See also Fritz Strich, *Goethe and World Literature*, New York 1972, p. 10.

¹⁹ The *Dictionnaire Larousse* gives two complementary definitions of 'prestige', both of which imply the notion of power or authority: '1. Ascendancy stemming from greatness and which seems to possess a mysterious character. 2. Influence, credit'.

²⁰ More precisely, those that have been longest in the space of literary competition. This explains why certain ancient spaces such as China, Japan and the Arab countries are both long-lived and subordinate: they entered the international literary space very late and in subordinate positions.

²¹ Notably those that can lay claim to (paradoxical) national 'universal classics'.

The power of the richest zones is perpetuated because it has real and measurable effects, notably the 'transfer of prestige' through reviews or prefaces by prestigious writers of hitherto unrecognized books, or of works from outside the centre: Victor Hugo's enthusiastic reviews of Walter Scott, at a time when the first French translations of his novels were appearing; Bernard Shaw's reviews of the first productions of Ibsen's plays in London; Gide's 1947 preface to Taha Hussein's *Livre des jours*; or the complex mechanism of recognition through translation, as in the consecration of Borges when translated by Roger Caillois, Ibsen by William Archer, and so on.

Degrees of autonomy

The second constitutive feature of the literary world is its relative autonomy.²² Issues posed in the political domain cannot be superimposed upon, or confounded with, those of the literary space, whether national or international. Much contemporary literary theory seems bent on creating this short-circuit, constantly reducing the literary to the political. A salient example would be Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka*, which claims to deduce from a single diary entry (25 December 1911), not only a particular political stance—thus affirming that Kafka is indeed 'a political author'—but a political vision that informs his entire oeuvre. Taking up a mistranslated phrase in the French version of the *Diary*, they construct the category of 'minor literature' and attribute to Kafka, via a flagrant historical anachronism, preoccupations which could not have been his before the First World War.²³

Autonomy implies that the events which take place in literary space are autonomous too: the watershed dates, manifestos, heroes, monuments, commemorations, capital cities, all combine to produce a specific history, which cannot be confused with that of the political world—even if it partially depends upon it, in a form that would require careful attention. Braudel, in his economic history of the world between the 15th and 18th centuries, notes the relative independence of artistic space with regard to

²² On the notion of 'relative autonomy', see Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l'art*, Paris 1992, especially pp. 75–164.

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.

the economic and hence the political. Venice was the economic capital of the 16th century, but Florence and its Tuscan dialect were intellectually in the ascendant. In the 17th century, Amsterdam became the great centre of European trade, but Rome and Madrid triumphed in the arts and literature. In the 18th century, London was the centre of the economic world but it was Paris that imposed its cultural hegemony:

In the late 19th and early 20th century, France, though lagging behind the rest of Europe economically, was the undisputed centre of Western painting and literature; the times when Italy and Germany dominated the world of music were not times when Italy or Germany dominated Europe economically; and even today, the formidable economic lead by the United States has not made it the literary and artistic leader of the world.²⁴

The case of the Latin American literatures would be further proof of the relative autonomy of the literary sphere, with no direct link, no cause-and-effect relation between political-economic strength and literary power or legitimacy at an international level. The global recognition accorded to these bodies of work, in the form of four Nobel Prizes, the worldwide esteem for their great names, the established legitimacy of their leading aesthetic model, despite the political and economic weakness of the countries concerned, show that the two orders cannot be confounded. To understand the conditions for the emergence of Latin America's literary 'boom', for example, we need to postulate the relative independence of literary phenomena.²⁵

But if the literary world is *relatively* independent of the political and economic universe, it is by the same token relatively dependent on it. The entire history of world literary space—both in its totality, and within each of the national literary spaces that compose it—is one of an initial dependence on national-political relations, followed by a progressive emancipation from them through a process of autonomization. The original dependence is still there to some degree, related to the seniority of the space under consideration; above all at the level of language. Their

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.

almost systematic nationalization across the world makes languages an ambiguous instrument, inextricably literary and political.

Forms of domination

In literary space the modes of domination are thus encased within each other. Three principal forms exert themselves to differential degrees, depending on the position of the given space: linguistic, literary and political domination—this last increasingly taking on an economic cast. The three overlap, interpenetrate and obscure one another to such an extent that often only the most obvious form—political-economic domination—can be seen. Numerous literary spaces are linguistically dependent (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Belgium, Switzerland, Quebec) without being politically subordinate; others, notably those emerging from decolonization, may have achieved linguistic independence but remain politically unfree. But subordination can also be measured in purely literary terms, independent of any political oppression or subjugation. It is impossible to account for certain types of exile, or changes in written language, temporary or permanent—those of August Strindberg, Joseph Conrad, Samuel Beckett, E. M. Cioran, for example—without hypothesizing the existence of strictly literary forms of domination, forces outside any power-political framework.²⁶

The consequences of literary domination for the production, publication and recognition of texts require their own analysis. The inevitable primacy that literary studies accord to psychology, for instance—notoriously based on the incomparable solitude of the writer—often hinders an account of the unnoticed structural constraints that impinge on a writer's production of works, down to their choice of form, genre, language. Take Gertrude Stein: although feminist studies rightly insist on her biographical and psychological particularity, especially her lesbianism, they leave unmentioned her location in world literary space, as if this were somehow self-evident. Or rather, anything relating to her position as an American in Paris is mentioned only in a biographical or anecdotal context. Yet we know that the US was subordinate in literary terms during the 1910s and 1920s, and that American writers came to Paris seeking literary resources and aesthetic models. Here we have an

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.

example of specifically literary domination, taking place in the absence of any other form of dependence. A simple analysis of Stein's status as an expatriate poet in Paris—'immigrant' status being a clear sign of dependence—and the position of the American literary space within the World of Letters would help us understand why Stein was so preoccupied, as was Ezra Pound at the same juncture, with the 'enrichment' of a national American literature. At the same time, her interest in the literary representation of Americans—her gigantic *The Making of Americans* its most striking manifestation—takes on its full significance. The fact that she was a woman and a lesbian in Paris in the 1910s is of course crucial to understanding her subversive impulse and the nature of her whole aesthetic project. But the historically structured relation of literary domination, clearly of primary importance, remains hidden from the critical tradition. As if, as a general rule, there were always some particularity—important no doubt, but still secondary—that concealed the overall pattern of literary power relations.

This form of literary ascendancy—so unusual, so hard to describe, so paradoxical—can in some situations represent a liberation, compared to the aesthetic, or aesthetico-political, imprisonment of archaic spaces that are closed to innovation. Its power is exercised over every text, every writer in the world, whatever their position and however clear their awareness of the mechanisms of literary domination; but all the more, over those who originate from a literary space that lacks autonomy or is located in one of the subordinate regions of the World of Letters.

However, the effects of consecration by the central authorities can be so powerful as to give certain writers from the margins who have achieved full recognition the illusion that the structure of domination has simply disappeared; seeing themselves as living proof of the establishment of a new 'world literary order'. Universalizing from their particular case, they claim that we are witnessing a total and definitive reversal of the balance of power between centre and peripheries. Carlos Fuentes, for instance, writes in *The Geography of the Novel*:

The old Eurocentrism has been overcome by a polycentrism which . . . should lead us to an 'activation of differences' as the common condition of a central humanity . . . Goethe's world literature has finally found its correct meaning: it is the literature of difference, the narration of diversity converging in one world . . . A single world, with numerous voices. The

new constellations that together form the geography of the novel are varied and mutating.²⁷

Multiculturalist enthusiasms have led others to assert that the relation between centre and periphery has now been radically reversed, and that the world of the periphery will henceforth occupy the central position. In reality, the effects of this pacific and hybridized fable are to depoliticize literary relations, to perpetuate the legend of the great literary enchantment and to disarm writers from the periphery who are seeking recognition strategies that would be both subversive and effective.

Modernismo as re-expropriation

Literary inequality and its relations of dominance provoke their own forms of struggle, rivalry and competition. But the subjugated here have also developed specific strategies which can only be understood in a literary framework, although they may have political consequences. Forms, innovations, movements, revolutions in narrative order may be diverted, captured, appropriated or annexed, in attempts to overturn existing literary power relations.

It is in these terms that I would analyse the advent of *modernismo* in the Spanish-speaking countries at the end of the 19th century. How to explain the fact that this movement, which turned the entire tradition of Hispanic poetry on its head, could have been dictated by a poet from Nicaragua, on the far reaches of the Spanish colonial empire? Rubén Darío, captivated from boyhood by the literary legend of Paris, stayed in the city in the late 1880s and, logically enough, was enthused by the French symbolist poetry that was just making its mark.²⁸ He then carried out an astonishing operation, which can only be called an expropriation of literary capital: he imported, into Spanish poetry itself, the very procedures, themes, vocabulary and forms lofted by the French symbolists. This expropriation was asserted quite explicitly, and the deliberate Frenchification of Spanish poetry, down to the phonemes and syntactic forms, designated 'mental Gallicism'. The diversion of this capital towards inextricably literary and

²⁷ Fuentes, *Geografía de la novela*, Madrid 1993, pp. 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.

political ends²⁹ was not, then, carried out in the passive mode of 'reception', and still less of 'influence', as traditional literary analysis would have it. On the contrary, this capture was the active form and instrument of a complex struggle. To combat both the political-linguistic dominance of Spain over its colonial empire and the sclerosis that was paralysing Spanish-language poetry, Darío openly asserted the literary domination exercised by Paris at that time.³⁰ Paris, both as cultural citadel and as potentially more neutral political territory for the subjects of other imperial or national powers, was used by numerous 19th and 20th-century writers as a weapon in their literary struggles.

The problem at stake in the theorization of literary inequality, then, is not whether peripheral writers 'borrow' from the centre, or whether or not literary traffic flows from centre to periphery; it is the restitution, to the subordinated of the literary world, of the forms, specificities and hardships of their struggles. Only thus can they be given credit for the invention—often concealed—of their creative freedom. Faced with the need to find solutions to dependence, and in the knowledge that the literary universe obeys Berkeley's famous *esse est percipi*—to be is to be perceived—they gradually perfect a set of strategies linked to their positions, their written language, their location in literary space, to the distance or proximity they want to establish with the prestige-bestowing centre. Elsewhere, I have tried to show that the majority of compromise solutions achieved within this structure are based on an 'art of distance', a way of situating oneself, aesthetically, neither too near nor too far; and that the most subordinated of writers manoeuvre with extraordinary sophistication to give themselves the best chance of being perceived, of existing in literary terms. An analysis of works originating in these zones as so many complex placement strategies reveals how many of the great literary revolutions have taken place on the margins and in subordinated regions, as witness Joyce, Kafka, Ibsen, Beckett, Darío and many more.

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.

For this reason, to speak of the centre's literary forms and genres simply as a colonial inheritance imposed on writers within subordinated regions is to overlook the fact that literature itself, as a common value of the entire space, is also an instrument which, if re-appropriated, can enable writers—and especially those with the fewest resources—to attain a type of freedom, recognition and existence within it. More concretely and directly, these reflections on the immense range of what is possible in literature, even within this overwhelming and inescapable structure of domination, also aim to serve as a symbolic weapon in the struggles of those most deprived of literary resources, confronting obstacles which writers at the centre cannot even imagine. The goal here is to demonstrate that what they experience as an insoluble, individual state of dependence, with no precedents or points of comparison, is in reality a position created by a structure that is at once historical and collective.³¹ As well as questioning the methods and tools of comparative literary studies, the structural comparativism of which I sketch the outlines here also seeks to be an instrument in the long and merciless war of literature.

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.