

Questions – Milan Kundera, “Die Weltliteratur”

1. Kundera defines Europe as “maximum diversity in minimum space” (290) What does this mean? How does this relate to his complaint about “irreparable inequality” (290)?
2. Explain the difference between “the provincialism of small nations” and “the provincialism of large nations.”
3. Is Kundera right to argue that “a nation’s possessiveness toward its artists works as a *small-context terrorism*, reducing the whole meaning of a work to the role it played in its homeland” (293)? Are you persuaded by Kundera’s claim that “... nobody would know Kafka today – nobody – if he had been a Czech” (291).?
4. Kundera distinguishes Slavic languages from “Slavic culture” (294). What’s the difference, and why does it matter? Is Kundera right to relativize the importance of linguistic factors as opposed to cultural, religious, intellectual ones? Do you agree that “to judge a novel one can do without a knowledge of its original language” (292), and that we should go beyond way of teaching foreign literature which “mire [it] in its home province” (292)?
5. “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” (294). Why is this problematic to Kundera? Does it mean he clearly identifies as a ‘Western ‘writer?

Questions – Jorge Luis Borges, “The Argentine Writer and Tradition”

1. What is “the problem of the Argentine writer and tradition”? Why is Borges sceptical about “its very existence” (392) as problem?
2. How have literary scholars (such as Lugones and Rojas) constructed a tradition for Argentine literature? On what grounds does Borges disagree with this construction?
3. What are some of the most common elements that supposedly “prove” a literary text’s Argentine character? How does Borges critique this?
4. “The Argentine cult of local color is a recent European cult that nationalists should reject as foreign import” (395). Explain what seems to be a paradox.
5. Do you agree with Borges’s defence of Enrique Banchs’s use of European images (such as tiled roofs, nightingales) in ‘La urna’ (394)? How would you react to the use of such ‘conventional’, ‘artificial’ images in a poem set in your own locality?

Glossary:

Payador (noun, plural: payadores) : popular singer; performer of popular songs in verse, accompanied on guitar; subject of folkloric and literary studies.

Gaucha (noun, plural gauchos): farmer-horseman, working in livestock farming; a countryperson living on the pampas; settler of European descendant; Argentine “cowboy”; national symbol.

Gaucha (adjective): pertaining to the lifestyle and mythology of gauchos; gaucha literature, ex. Ricardo Güiraldes, *Don Segundo Sombra* (1926).

Gauchaesque (adjective): evocative of gaucha style and sensibility; gauchaesque poetry, ex. José Hernández, *Martín Fierro* (1872).

Questions – Pascale Casanova, “Literature as a World”

1. Casanova distinguishes the history of “world literature” (72) from the history the “world literary space” (72). What’s the difference? What, according to Casanova, are the benefits of conducting a literary history from the point of view of world literary space?
2. What is the “Greenwich Meridian of literature”(75)? What role does it play in world literary space? How does it impact writers differently, depending on their distance towards the literary centre?
3. For Casanova, the generally national orientation in the study of literatures “leads to a form of astigmatism” (78) because “[t]he nation and international are not separate spheres; they are two opposed stances struggling within the same domain” (81-82). Explain how, according to Casanova, writers experience the contradictory demands of both the national and international spheres. Compare her critique with Kundera’s critique of “small context-terrorism” and of the study of literature “in its home province”.
4. Casanova draws on the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío’s “expropriation of [French] literary capital” (88) to argue that “[t]he problem at stake in the theorizing of literary inequality... is not whether peripheral writers borrow from the centre.... it is the restitution, to the subordinated of the literary world, of the forms, specificities, and hardships of their struggle” (89). Does this statement resonate with some of the problems highlighted in the essays by Kundera and/or Borges?