

Fall 2007

Review of Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise.

Bali Sahota
University of Minnesota

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc>
[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Sahota, Bali (2007). Review of "Review of Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise.," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 6 : No. 2
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol6/iss2/5>

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrc/vol6/iss2/5>

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters*, trans. M. B. DeBevoise. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005. 440 pp. ISBN 9780674013452.

Reviewed by Bali Sahota, University of Minnesota

"The Figure in the Carpet" by Henry James provides a productive motif and suggestive metaphor for Pascale Casanova's literary method. The idea and meaning of literature—mediated by specific works but best disclosed by the overarching institution, field or world of literature—can be discovered somewhat "like a complex figure in a Persian carpet" (2). "Each figure," Casanova clarifies, "can be grasped only in terms of the position it occupies within the whole, and its interconnections with all the others." [1] What her method holds as its main heuristic principle is the possibility of detecting in a singular literary work and across the field of literature as a whole patterns, regularities, variations, and repetitions. Reading consists in attaining an angle of vision on "the one right combination" or the "superb intricacy" (2) mentioned in James's story—laying bare various intersections across the expanse of world literary space. What is mediated through the figures and structures of a single literary work can be made explicable by the specific position it occupies in world literary space. World literary space, in turn, is always being restructured by the different struggles taking place between works in the peripheries and centers, by the economy of recognition and prestige, inclusion and exclusion. Its specific geography overlaps with but remains distinct from economic and political geographies. According to Casanova, the specific meaning that literature as such expresses seems to depend upon its attainment of a logic distinct from economic and political conditions. Literature must, in other words, overcome the latter to be understood as quintessentially aesthetic.

In making meaning dependent upon socio-political planes of existence, what we have in Casanova's work is a dramatic shift away from a general aestheticizing attitude. This attitude is interested, as she notes, in the "'pure' formal universe of literature" (but often simply reproduces the dominant ideology) (xiii). Casanova does not, though, dismiss form: it is, after all, one of the integral motifs forming world literary space as a whole. Her quest for a disclosure of the particular pattern linking the singular to the whole in world literary space distances itself from the close readings and sharp autonomizations that characterize most literary study, but her method does not disallow a return to form as an object reintegrated with non-literary domains of existence. [2] It is simply that for her "any description of [the structure of world literary space] 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" (6). Going against the conventions means ultimately uncovering interlinkages between world literary space and socio-political orders. Overcoming the self-enclosures and transcendent topoi of formalist literary study is made possible by the prior positing of a socio-historical totality. (On account of this, her study consistently brings out a hermeneutic dimension, never dissolving into a simplistic positivist literary history.)

Such a restructuration of interpretive categories according to the internal workings of the world republic of letters is a huge task. What Casanova accomplishes should not be judged against it. Instead, what we should ask is: What are the patterns that her method allows us to grasp, what interconnections, what relations, what meaning that could not obtain otherwise? What is

especially significant, in other words, about "the internal workings of the world republic of letters"? In the force field of world literary space what semi-autonomous logics come into view, and how are these logics related to broader, ever more encompassing ones? What can be said about literature as a world and about the nature of single literary works on account of it? "[L]ooking at the carpet as a whole" on this occasion brings out particular intricacies on a few separate planes that we can look at in turn. First is the creation of language as an institution and as a resource that can perpetuate and aggrandize itself as symbolic capital. Second is the establishment of institutions that create literature as a specific entity. Key here are the conduits for the creation of world literary space such as translators or the markers of prestige and recognition such as awards. Third are the literary or symbolic revolts of the writers on the margins and acceptance of these by the core centers of world literary space. Fourth is the manner in which the "symbolic form" of literature takes shape through catalysts of a spiritual sort (religion) and the institutions that seek to provide their own kind of quasi-religious aura (the nation). Through looking at these major patterns we will get a clearer sense of what the work as a whole accomplishes, what its limits might be, and what kinds of revolts it enjoins within the current range of emergent literary criticism—as well as the contradictory force it generates on its own.

First things come first in her analysis: Casanova begins her study with the formation of language as a resource for building symbolic capital and credit in the literary market of international cultural space. Language is what is at issue at various levels throughout the work. It is cultivated as the marker of social status and emerges literarily speaking as credit that can be extended to literarily dominated languages (through translation). It also allows for the creation of aesthetic registers that free literature "from consideration of political utility" and give a writer aesthetic autonomy and world literary space its own logic (46). As an essential element in world literary space, language displays a variety of patterns in Casanova's work: a receptacle of linguistic labors, French, goes from being a local language to the "Latin of the moderns." Such languages, creating linkages in world literary space through their extension outward (through colonial policies) and their absorption by other peoples as signs of status, inspire various challenges. These challenges have the shorthand phrase of the "Herderian revolution" in the book: "the right and necessity of writing in one's native tongue" (78). This immediately establishes one of the unequal relations in world literary space and becomes the source of a variety of responses on the part of writers. Whereas universalist vernaculars such as French have the presumed capacity to transcend locality, the languages of the Herderian revolution are always subsumed politically under the nationalist banner. The metaphor that often captures world literary space for Casanova is one of warfare and struggle: the literary field is a battlefield in which struggles are waged to overcome such symbolic inequalities of center and periphery, universality and particularity, development and underdevelopment. The manner in which such inequality is overcome in Casanova's perspective is either through the aesthetic efforts of a Joyce, a Beckett, or an Ibsen—in which genius aesthetic elaboration allows for the political closures of the nation-state to be broken [3]; or through the consecrating graces of the literary center, whose recognition is generally unmindful of political commitment or particular social address (making the consecrated literary work isomorphic with its own political and social *weltanschauung*). For Casanova, universality is best determined by Parisian taste. Recognition in Paris made writers such as Faulkner celebrities on their home turf and even Shakespeare canonical in England. Thus statements like "the fact remains that the greatest English authors enjoyed truly universal

recognition during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries only through the translation of their writings into French" (146) pepper this book.

Such displays of trust (or credit) in the capacities of the literary center and suspicion when it comes to aesthetic merit in peripheral or national contexts alerts one to how Casanova herself may be positioned in terms of world literary space. (It is her Paris, after all, that constitutes *the* literary center of world literary space, as we are repeatedly reminded.) But, for now, let us move to the realm of institutions that establish and configure this space—making it both worldly and literary, and giving it a specific pattern. Casanova's design for the world literary space that arose since the sixteenth century recalls Fernand Braudel's notion of economy-world: it is hierarchically organized on the basis of underlying structures of political inequality, unevenly distributed resources, and differential access to the productive and crediting institutions concentrated in the centers. World literary space is only semi-autonomous, which is to say that unequal socio-political structures can determine forms of symbolic domination and subordination. "The external forces exerted upon the least endowed literary spaces today assume the forms of linguistic domination and economic domination (notably in the form of foreign control over publishing)" (81). On the one hand, then, world literary space may simply reproduce the inequalities of geopolitical space. [4] Yet, on the other, Casanova must, to sustain her argument, allow for the particularly distinct logics of literary space to manifest themselves. It is from this point that various problems and inconsistencies come to light. She would like to posit an autonomy for literature, but all that can be considered literature is subject to the market and its temporality. The various crediting institutions and arbiters of *littérarité* are all located at the centers of power in world literary space. Rather than being a domain of free expressiveness, a mode by which different kinds of communities and sensibilities may be invoked, a political force manifested, or a zone in which distinct temporalities may overlap or be multilayered, literature turns out to be uniformly embedded in a singular market, a simple temporality, and tied puppet-like to a singular spatiality of which only the centers ultimately determine the standards of literary excellence. "Impressing the stamp of *littérarité* upon texts that came from far-flung lands, thereby denationalizing and departicularizing them, declaring them to be legal tender in all countries under its literary jurisdiction," is the prerogative of Paris, London, and now New York. Only these centers have the consecrating powers required to "manufacture universal literature" (83). Literary innovation and aesthetic breakthroughs can take place in peripheral locations of world literary space. But only when those innovations are recognized as quintessentially literary or aesthetic by the requisite authorities do they become such. There is no literature then (or no literature worthy of the title), Casanova seems to be suggesting, unless it is a part of, self-consciously located within, and recognized by the institutions of world literary space. The pattern that thus emerges in her analysis is that of a mirroring hegemon rooted in the centers of the literary world market, reflecting to world literary space as a whole those features of the dominated zones that most appeal to it. It is satisfied most by what it wants and expects. The hegemonic center is therefore most beneficent for those writers who organize their work to meet its demands. Either literature of the outlying spaces abides, or it is condemned to neglect, either it innovates to revamp the standards of the centers, or it is considered more backward than the centers' own stodgy styles. [5]

Such a conceptualization of *littérarité*—of what makes literature literature—has heavy consequences. It potentially encloses Casanova in a world of literariness that is most familiar and

shuts out whatever might literarily exist autonomously of world literary space. [6] Nowhere do her precepts about *littérarité* make their impact more strongly than in her construal of relations between writers on the margins and those at the centers of world literary space. What comes to light is a very peculiar economy of aesthetic and symbolic exchange, configured as revolutions and revolts, as well as some consistently brilliant commentary on modern writers' perspectives on literary practice and ideology. Kafka's diary notes on "small literature" provide her a model for examining the intersection of location in world literary space and meaning of literary form. Two aspects of Kafka's *aperçus* are highlighted in the work. One is Kafka's elaboration of a unitary schema for understanding small literatures: their meaning for him can only be grasped through their interrelations with organic popular cultures, on the one hand, and grand literary traditions, on the other. The other is Kafka's intuition that location within world literary space is central for decoding the nature of literary form. Writers on the margins face "a terrible and inescapable dilemma" and the best of them are able to forge an aesthetic that dialectically resolves what is for Casanova a central antinomy:

either to affirm their difference and so condemn themselves to the difficult and uncertain fate of national writers (whether their appeal is regional, popular, or other) writing in "small" literary languages that are hardly, or not at all, recognized in the international literary world; or to betray their heritage and, denying their difference, assimilate the values of one of the great literary centers. (180)

Those who take the latter route—exemplified by V.S. Naipaul, Henri Michaux, E.M. Cioran—represent the lowest level of literary revolt, if revolt at all. Assimilation freezes the potential for literary innovation. For Naipaul, it resulted in "a determination to prove himself more English than the English" and "disinclined him to innovate with regard to literary form or style" (211, 212). The same could be said, *mutatis mutandis*, for the other assimilated figures. The rebels, in contrast, are the true heroes of Casanova's narrative. Joyce, Kafka, Beckett, and Faulkner all establish aesthetic strategies to overcome both marginalization and national (or political) subordination. (A difficulty emerges in her overall apparatus at this point: The national-popular for Casanova is consistently mixed up throughout her work with what Benedict Anderson calls "official nationalism." [7] This mix-up means that the popular has no autonomy from the politics of the nation-state. Because of that, the national-popular literary forms are not granted any specific validity or recognition or aesthetic merit by consecrating authorities of the centers of world literary space—or by Casanova herself.)

We come then, finally, to the last of the patterns configuring the world of literature for Casanova. This one is more submerged than the others and less explicitly or theoretically thematized. For those reasons, the pattern of the relationship configuring modern literature with spiritual (or quasi-spiritual) orders requires an angle of vision outside of Casanova's own perspective in order to become visible. It appears throughout *The World Republic of Letters* that literature, with its centralized consecrating authorities and autonomous logic, maintains an ideology of transcendence from the mundane. Whereas this is most manifest in a literature that has overcome peripheral locality and national particularity and can float freely in world literary space, investigations into nationalism have revealed a similar logic as well. The manner in which the nation is able, through rituals of commemoration, demands of sacrifice, and invocations of eternal belonging, to approximate and occasionally usurp traditional spiritual orders has been

profoundly analyzed by Anderson. It appears in both cases that a kind of aura or supernatural substance is being translated from more conventional or monopolizing traditional authorities—the church or temple, sacred scripture or icon—into traditionally secular spheres: the state and literature, allowing for comparable ritual practices and altered dispositions to transpire. This comes out most emphatically in the discussion of the American novelist Henry Roth's conversion-like experience after his discovery of Joyce. In Roth's construction of the experience, an "*alchemical transformation*" occurs in a general way: "his whole world was a junkyard. All those myriad, myriad squalid impressions he took for granted, all were convertible from base to precious, from pig iron to gold ingot" (335). Yet the paradox of Casanova's account of this kind of transcendence—that which sustains itself precariously on the ideology of literary autonomy—is that it is understandable within the terms of the world that is transcended: capital, credit, brokers, markets. Interestingly, then, literary autonomy as an ideology is partly debunked by Casanova herself. Rather than being autonomous, *littérarité* becomes commensurate with contemporary cosmopolitanism of the leisurely (or business) classes, which has enshrined accomplishment and perfection, making culture a repository of new quasi-spiritual values, and not incidentally the means for establishing transnational market tastes. Literature is just the quasi-spiritual expression of an enduring *mentalité bougeoise*: this-worldly paganism. It forecloses upon engagement with "the lesson," as Brecht would put it. There is little if any potential granted to an artistic practice that seeks to close the distance between its message and the world, between its impulses and the society of which it is a part. Abiding by the modernist "taboo on the didactic in art" [8] is one of the conditions for inclusion into world literary space. It accords little credit, ultimately, to any literary practice that is not immediately aligned with the ideologies of literary autonomy of the centers. And the manner in which literary autonomy is discussed seems never to take on negativity toward world literary space—or even the existing world—as a whole. The unexpected forms by which a will to freedom come into being are undermined from the start. The essential allure of a literature in its role of negating the reification of identity in the existent is thus undermined. It would take an infringement of modernist taboos to overcome such obstacles on the way toward a recognition of such essential expressions of freedom, whether they take form through political commitment, popular-national address, or belief systems beyond the sphere of influence of bourgeois cultural norms. Instead, Casanova presumes that marginal writers would necessarily want to be a part of this world of letters, and to derive from its canonical figures "justification for their own work" (355).

What becomes then of those elements of spiritual existence that end up alienated from the quasi-spiritual world erected upon the suspension of disbelief rather than belief itself, upon values that are in consonance with material interests rather than at odds with those, upon notions of liberal inclusiveness that exclude political commitments and social relations of a different point of departure? Does world literary space not relegate to reactionary reconstructions of religiosity in the Post-Enlightenment world the potential for a freedom that it cannot quite come to terms with? Does it not leave such a potential to distortion and disarmament? Could this not simply be on account of the discrepancy between the forms of expression that such energy assumes and the forms expected by the hegemon of world literary value?

Notes

[1] Pascale Casanova, "Literature as World," *New Left Review* 31 (January/February 2005): 72.

[2] Though she herself rarely gets immersed in the world of a literary work, Casanova's reading method certainly would not disallow more sustained formalist preoccupations of literary works.

[3] Some of the more brilliant passages in the book reflect on language in Beckett. But one may wonder whether, instead of liberating himself from some of the constraints of the national literary space, he has not actually got himself stuck in a solipsistic prison house of his own making by trying to approximate the value and code of universality. See Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, 318-320.

[4] "To one degree or another," Casanova admits, "literary relations of power are forms of political relations of power." See *World Republic of Letters*, 81.

[5] See *World Republic of Letters*, 193-94.

[6] One of the enigmatic qualities of Casanova's work is that she reveals a theoretical awareness of kinds of traps she ultimately becomes prey to. Such is the case with Eurocentrism. This comes out most clearly in the context of her discussion of elements that "do not exist literarily." See *World Republic of Letters*, 279.

[7] Anderson describes official nationalism as "an anticipatory strategy adopted by dominant groups which are threatened with marginalization or exclusion from an emerging nationally imagined community" (*Imagined Communities* [New York: Verso, 1983]) 101.

[8] Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998): 3.