Pascale Casanova's World of Letters and Its Legacies

Introduction

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This special issue is dedicated to the work and legacies of French literary critic Pascale Casanova, who passed away on September 29, 2018, at the age of 59. Exploring the issues of literary autonomy and the revolutionary force of the periphery, but also the inequalities between languages and cultures, her work has been deeply influential in literary studies and beyond. Her seminal book *The World Republic of Letters* (Harvard UP 2004) is foundational for world literature studies, together with Franco Moretti's essays "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000) and "More Conjectures" (2003), and David Damrosch's *What is World Literature* (2003). In this introduction, we begin by outlining Casanova's atypical trajectory; we then turn to the major theoretical and practical issues her work puts forth, as well as her intellectual engagement; and finally, we look at the legacies of her works as illustrated by each of the contributions included in this issue.

1 The Atypical Trajectory of a Literary Critic

Before dedicating herself entirely to research, Pascale Casanova was one of the most important French literary critics active in the media. After studying modern literature and philosophy at Tours where she was born, she worked as a producer for the radio station France-Culture. In her programs "Les Jeudis littéraires," followed by "Les mardis littéraires" and then "l'Atelier littéraire," she introduced the most innovative French and foreign authors, with her beautiful

deep voice that still resonates in the memory of her audience, punctuated by her pearly laughter. But she sadly lost this voice and this laughter soon after she left the radio in 2010, struck by an incurable disease that she courageously fought for a decade, while the invitations she received in the wake of the worldwide reception of *The World Republic of letters* piled up.

An independent researcher, Pascale Casanova continued to produce a highly original and inspiring body of research in a genuinely disinterested manner and in the isolation that was forced on her by the disease. Indeed, despite the international recognition of her book, she never received an academic position in France, in large part because departments of literary studies in France were resistant to the sociology of literature, which confronts academics with their own prejudices and beliefs in a system that prefers reproduction to innovation. Among these beliefs, the strongest and hence the most sensitive is the belief in the purity of literary autonomy that Casanova's work questioned, problematized, and nuanced, in the footsteps of her mentor Pierre Bourdieu and his proposal of relative artistic autonomy in his seminal book *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (1992). Holding up a mirror to this world, Bourdieu's *Homo academicus* (1984) exposed the inequalities and underlying beliefs of the French system of higher education; his work was received by the world of literary academics as was *The World Republic of Letters* later on. The sociology of literature isn't a comfortable partner of dialogue for those who don't wish to be confronted with the social conditions and genesis of the accepted beliefs underlying the power structures of the field in which they are active.

Nevertheless, Casanova participated in the European network ESSE (*Pour un espace des sciences sociales européen* [For a European space of social sciences]), and she taught at the EHESS in 2003–2004, then in Geneva in 2005, at UCLA in 2006, and at Duke University from 2011 to 2015.

Pascale Casanova was also an engaged intellectual. She defended the autonomy of intellectual life and culture against the noxious effects of concentration and financial rationalization enforced on the media and publishing world, and the consequences of neo-liberal policies on public media such as Radio-France, of which she had had a bitter experience herself. Her life and work are the most noble embodiment of the engaged intellectual's critical function.

Running counter to predictions of the decline in the global impact of French culture, and the statistics that show that only a small share of scholarly titles by female authors in particular get translated (only 15% of the translations from French into English, see Sapiro 71), the worldwide reception of her work is a remarkable phenomenon that hasn't yet been sufficiently analyzed. We therefore included in this special issue two essays by David Damrosch and Mag-

dalena Răduță dedicated to the reception and impact of Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters* from the West to the East. In his own words, David Damrosch's essay shows "how *La République mondiale des lettres* was transformed in the world republic of scholarship, and with what effects on her subsequent books." Symmetrically, Magdalena Răduță's essay looks into "the fate of Pascale Casanova's translated work in the former communist literary spaces, where her theoretical argument about linguistic and historical dominance is a historical reality."

2 Rethinking the International Literary Space

Based on her PhD dissertation entitled *L'espace littéraire international* (1997), supervised by Pierre Bourdieu, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Seuil, 1999) soon became a classic after its English translation *The World Republic of Letters* was published by Harvard UP in 2004. Thanks to its transnational approach, it had a major impact on literary studies at large and on comparative and world literature in particular. But the echo of this book went beyond literary studies and in different directions, from translation studies to sociology, to history, and even to non-academic intellectual circles, as shown in Orhan Pamuk's message on her death: "Casanova's *World Republic of Letters* is a unique book!"

Casanova describes the emergence and development of an autonomous international literary field in opposition to the instrumentalization of literature for the construction of national identities. Works and genres circulate in their original language or in translation, forming a World Republic of Letters endowed with its own specific consecrating authorities, of which the Nobel prize is the most prestigious and unanimously recognized distinction. This field is structured by unequal power relations between cultures according to their literary capital, which can be quantified through the number of works that entered the world literary canon. The globally most established cultures – the French, the English, the German, and the Russian – enjoy a clear advantage. Yet at the same time, as Casanova argued in an edited volume entitled *Des littératures combattives: L'internationale des nationalismes littéraires* (2011), literary nationalism has also been a way for dominated literatures to fight back against the domination active in the international literary field.

All of Casanova's works deal with the question of linguistic domination. In her admirable monographs *Beckett, l'abstracteur* (1997) and *Kafka en colère* (2011), she connects the symbolic revolutions these writers achieved with their belonging to a "minor literature" in Deleuze and Guattari's sense. For instance, she interprets Kafka's novels as a euphemized critique of the symbolic violence

underlying the assimilationist desire of Prague's Jewish community. She resituated Kafka's choice among the options available to his generation of German-speaking Jewish intellectuals who rejected their fathers' assimilationist model. Whereas many in his circle opted for Zionism, Kafka found in the burgeoning Yiddish theater an art that he saw as truly national and popular. An ethnologist of the Jewish people, he explored in his work, in an encrypted code, the symbolic violence that underlies assimilation, then being denounced by his Zionist friends. Kafka deals with it from multiple perspectives: as a dead end, a treason, a loss, a culpability, an individual and collective tragedy. Casanova argues that

Dans les récits et les romans, et en particulier dans *Le Procès*, le désir d'assimilation est incarné par des personnages qui obéissent à une loi, non énoncée explicitement, mais impérative, leur imposant de se soumettre aux règles d'une société qui les méprise et les humilie, sans qu'aucune violence physique les y contraigne et sans qu'ils en aient clairement conscience. Il résulte du même coup que le centre caché de l'œuvre est une réflexion (très critique) sur la domination.

CASANOVA, *Kafka en Colère*, 359

In the short stories and novels, in particular in *The Trial*, the desire for assimilation is embodied by characters who obey a law that is not explicitly stated but is imperative, impelling them to submit themselves to the rules of a society that despises and humiliates them, without being constrained by any physical violence nor having a clear awareness of this. As a result, the hidden center of the work is a (very critical) reflection on domination. (Our translation)¹

Her last book, *La Langue mondiale: Traduction et domination* (2015) analyzes the role of translation as a weapon against linguistic domination and as a mode of accumulating symbolic capital, beginning with the example of the translations from Latin into French in the 16th and 17th centuries and closing with a discussion of the implications of the growing domination of English.

In a conference in 2012 on the "Transformations of the Literary Field" at the University of Chicago Center in Paris, she concluded her beautiful talk, "The Greenwich Meridian: Reflections on Time in Literature," with a true research program. Talking about the classics, the avant-garde, and books that make a major impact, she stressed that

¹ Due to the pandemic, we were unable to find a copy of the English translation in time for the publication of this JWL issue, so we translated it ourselves.

Du point de vue des représentations collectives, on comprend que le présent littéraire est la seule modalité temporelle tolérée dans le monde littéraire. La seule reconnaissance, la seule validité c'est-à-dire la seule légitimité possible en littérature, c'est d'appartenir, d'une façon ou d'une autre, au présent. Cette contemporanéité perpétuelle est sans doute l'une des structures du monde de la littérature les plus puissantes. Elle signifie, en accord avec les représentations les plus profondément ancrées dans nos inconscients de littéraires, que le temps n'existe pas; ou que, au pays de la littérature, il n'y a pas de passé. L'une des fonctions majeures de la structure temporelle de l'espace littéraire pourrait donc être de perpétuer le déni de l'histoire de la littérature.

C'est la raison pour laquelle je crois qu'une véritable réflexion collective qui prendrait en compte ce déni pourrait nous amener à repenser la possibilité d'une nouvelle forme d'histoire de la littérature. Au lieu de considérer les divers types de consécration comme des sortes de rituels ou de processus magiques, c'est-à-dire des phénomènes qui échapperaient à l'histoire, le projet pourrait être de réhistoriciser tout ce qui a été arbitrairement arraché à l'histoire. Et la première de ces histoires pourrait être une histoire des modes d'éternisation des textes ou mieux, pour citer Borges, une *histoire de l'éternité*.

CASANOVA, "Le méridien de Greenwich," in press

When it comes to collective representations, the literary present is the only temporal modality tolerated in the literary world. The only recognition, the only validity, that is to say the only acceptable legitimacy in literature, is to belong in one way or another to the present. This eternal contemporaneity is probably one of the most powerful structures of the world of literature. According to the most deeply anchored representations in our literary unconscious, time does not exist; the country of literature knows no past. One of the major functions of the temporal structure of literary space could thus be to perpetuate the denial of literature's history.

For this reason, I think that a true collective reflection that would take this denial into account could help us reconsider the possibility of a new form of the history of literature. Instead of looking at the different types of consecration as rituals or magical processes, that is to say phenomena that escape history, we could re-historicize everything that has been arbitrarily extracted from history. And the first of these histories could be a history of the ways of making texts eternal, or, even better, to cite Borges, a *"history of eternity."* (Our translation)

3 Casanova's Legacies

Casanova's work has sparked many rich and fruitful debates, while inspiring new research. Apart from the upcoming special issue in French dedicated to Casanova's work (Ducournau, Leperlier, Sapiro eds., "La littérature au-delà des nations"), this issue of the *Journal of World Literature* presents original research inspired by different aspects of Casanova's work, building on it in new directions and discussing it through new case studies or new materials.

The eight essays in this issue are divided into two parts. The first four essays directly explore Casanova's theoretical ideas put forth in *The World Republic of Letters*, through the reception of her book in translation (David Damrosch and Magdalena Răduță), through the development on an international scale of Pierre Bourdieu's national field theory (Mads Rosendahl Thomsen), and through her previous book on Samuel Beckett as a testing ground for the more comprehensive theory of the international field (Thirthankar Chakraborty). The four essays included in the second part of this issue then develop Casanova's theoretical ideas in different directions: translation studies (Tiphaine Samoyault), premodern literary studies (Michiel Leezenberg), East Asian studies (Jing Tsu), and postcolonial studies (Madeline Bedecarré).

In a preface to the pocket edition of *La République mondiale des lettres* in 2008, Pascale Casanova herself reflected on *The World Republic's* ambiguous new life in translation. We are pleased to include Casanova's Preface in this issue, translated into English for the first time, as a metapreface to the essays that follow.² In the opening essay that follows his translation of her preface, David Damrosch situates Casanova's position in the international academic field through her own theory. Relying on this preface as well as on a wide range of other sources, Damrosch critically analyzes the international reception of her work and her lucid perception of the unequal power relations that this reception revealed within the global academic field: in the dominant Anglo-American countries, discussions mostly focus on the centrality of Paris, a claim dismissed as Eurocentric; conversely, in the dominated countries from Latin-America and Eastern Europe, it was appropriated as a weapon in the struggle against the domination of English.

The latter case is the subject of Magdalena Răduță's essay, which gives a comparative analysis of the reception of *The World Republic of Letters* in three

2 We would like to thank Didier Giner and Le Seuil for permitting the translation and David Damrosch for translating it.

former Communist countries: Romania, Serbia, and Slovenia. The Romanian translation came out in two different editions in 2007 and 2016, presented with significantly different editorial strategies; the reception of Casanova's theory evolved from a rather mixed and confused initial reception that searched for a confirmation of Romania's own literary canon through the writers selected by Casanova (the case of Emil Cioran) to a model for rethinking the cultural capital of Romanian literature from the point of view of the international market. Beyond a model for young writers to attain international recognition, Răduță argues that Casanova's concept of literary autonomy is a powerful tool for unpacking the autonomous position embraced by writers during the Communist period as an obliquely political position.

Indeed, Casanova's theoretical ideas put forth in *The World Republic of Letters* have just as a powerful impact on nationally framed literary studies as on the more obvious fields of comparative and world literature. Mads Rosendahl Thomsen's essay performs a circular movement: from the nationally framed theory of the literary field that goes back to Bourdieu and his *Rules of Art*, to its expansion as an international literary field in *The World Republic of Letters*, and then back to the problem of the national frame as shown in Casanova's last book, *La Langue mondiale: Traduction et domination* – or rather, as Casanova herself writes the term at times, *domiNation*. In this oscillation between the national and the international, Kafka and Beckett stand out as models for Casanova of migrant writers whose trajectories, as unpacked with the theoretical tools of the international literary field, can become seminal for the emerging field of migrant literature.

Thirthankar Chakraborty's study of Beckett develops and enriches some of Casanova's insights with new materials, connecting her work on the literary revolution achieved by the author of *Malone Dies* with her *World Republic of Letters*. In Casanova's view, Beckett's bilingualism and his position as an outsider at the Parisian center of the international literary space are two properties that predisposed him to achieve this revolution, which she equates to abstraction in art. Chakraborty demonstrates, building on Beckett's correspondence and writings, that this makes him a paradigmatic example of Casanova's argument in her comprehensive *World Republic of Letters*, since Paris offered Beckett a cosmopolitan and autonomous space.

The four essays included in the second part of this issue open with Tiphaine Samoyault's contribution to Casanova's approach of translation as an unequal exchange between central and peripheral literatures (Casanova 2002, 2010, 2015), in which Samoyault proposes an original theory of indirect translation. As she underscores, relay (or indirect) translation – i.e. translating from a translation rather than from the original text – is much more common than

we usually think, and is mistakenly considered a decreasing phenomenon. In Samoyault's view, relay translation reveals more general rules of the circulation of works in translation. She argues that translation always confronts more than two texts or two languages. This invites us to rethink the role of mediators, further complicating the initial networks of literary agents as outlined in Casanova's works.

One of the key legacies of Casanova's theory of the emerging world literary space lies in a direction that is not explored in her work: premodern literature and its non-European cosmopolises. Michiel Leezenberg's innovative essay calls attention to "the existence of a premodern and early modern transnational field of literature" that goes back to non-Western cosmopolitan traditions and premodern processes of vernacularization. These processes predate and are distinct from the national languages rising around 1800, which Casanova considers the inception of the modern history of the World Republic of Letters. Leezenberg argues in favor of extending Casanova's world republic to embrace pre-modern and non-European literary traditions, as he illustrates with case studies from Georgian, Kurdish, and Armenian literature within the Persianate cosmopolis.

"Of the existing approaches engaging with world literature, Pascale Casanova's contribution remains the most prescient and relevant to the contemporary world," writes Jing Tsu. She argues that this is so because it maintains the presupposition that the *world* in world literature can only emerge in the locally sensitive relation between the social and the uniqueness and unrepeatability of the literary text. But Tsu asks what texts are seen as truly embracing the world as such. Only those of the first-tier literary agents, leaving the majority of second and third-tier agents in the shadows. Tsu proposes "three figurative spaces for analysis: 1) the syncretic; 2) the rebel; and 3) the governed" to think about the invisible margins of the world of world literature as illustrated in contemporary Chinese literature.

Madeline Bedecarré's innovative research on the literary prizes awarded by the Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie looks back at Casanova from a postcolonial perspective. Combining close reading with sociological methods (interviews, analysis of promotional material and media sources, profiles of jury members and of awardees), she argues that the notion of "world literature" was appropriated by the Prix des Cinq Continents in order to overcome the crisis triggered by the "Manifesto for a World-Literature in French," which criticized the notion of "francophonie" for having institutionalized the persisting unequal literary relationship between France (especially Paris) and its former colonies, by separating "Francophone literature" from "French literature." In Bedecarré's view, the notion of "world literature" was appropriated by

the prize to mask these longstanding inequalities and thus perpetuate them, all the while laying claim to cultural diversity and universalism. She shows that most of the members of the jury, wherever they come from, live in Paris; the national diversity of the prize-winners obscures the fact that French (and even Parisian) publishers are overrepresented in the list of awarded books.

Casanova's work stands out for our field, but also for literary studies in general, through its double call to a lucid disenchantment of literary practice as highly situated socially, economically, and politically, but also as an autonomous practice that configures its own world. As long as books circulate, in direct or indirect translation, and as long as writers think beyond the borders of language, culture, and nation, literature will have its own empire: the empire of the mind. This empire has its own agonistic history of canonical struggle, as Harold Bloom put it, but as Casanova reminds us, it is also inscribed in "a world of rivalry, struggle, and inequality," "a world that is secret and yet perceptible by all (especially its most dispossessed members)" (*The World Republic of Letters* 4). In this special issue of *JWL* we have tried to reconfigure a small part of Casanova's rich empire of the mind, her own world of letters and its legacies.

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