One Clearly Defined Phenomenon and a Unified Perspective: Is a History of World Literature Possible?

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The article examines Pascale Casanova's and Franco Moretti's innovative conceptions of history of world literature against the background of Erich Auerbach's more traditional conception. The cornerstones of the latter – a unified perspective, a clearly defined phenomenon, an intuitive hypothesis – may be discarded, but the fundamental problem of constructing the object under study is still unresolved.

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The question in the title is not purely rhetorical, although it might seem so. These days it dominates the research agenda of comparative literature scholars the world over, even if we are now less confident when answering the other questions it implies: what literature is, what is worldly about world literature, and how any history should be written. The American Comparative Literature Association's last two reports on the state of the discipline put the question of world, or global, or planetary literature at the core of whatever else we might be doing. Even if these reports ask this question in such a manner that it encourages institutional responses (how to teach world literature?) without addressing the underlying intellectual question (what world literature *is*?), the last decade bore witness to several challenging attempts to define the nature of this elusive subject.

The difficulties associated with world literature are notorious. More than fifty years ago Erich Auerbach summed them up in his contribution to *Festschrift* for Fritz Strich, the author of a monograph on Goethe's idea of world literature. In order to represent *Weltliteratur* adequately, Auerbach claimed that a literary historian must be able to survey the entire material *himself*. This, of course, is impossible. How many lives would one need,

asked Auerbach, to learn fifty literary languages and to master a six thousand year long tradition, when even for a small but significant segment of that tradition, such as Dante's work, one whole life does not suffice? How can we therefore start thinking about a synthesis of the entirety of written literature? A history of world literature written by a group of researchers, continued Auerbach, would not be an adequate response, because a historical synthesis of this kind must be a product of personal intuition. Although Auerbach did not clarify this point, we can presume that the lack of a unified perspective, achieved only in books by single authors, is what he finds missing in collectively written syntheses. Personal intuition, claimed Auerbach, should very early on in one's career provide the starting point which itself must be limited to one clearly defined phenomenon, which is placed at the centre of literary tradition in such a manner that one can reach the most remote corners of 'world history' by following its lead. Auerbach did not cite his own *Mimesis* as an example, but instead drew attention to Curtius' *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, which traced the survival of scholastic tradition by following only one clearly defined phenomenon: the *topoi*. Abstract categories, continued Auerbach, such as the Baroque or the idea of fate, were not specific enough to be good starting points, and could be dangerously misleading. A synthesis accomplished by one person alone, added Auerbach, would be a scholarly literary history as much as a work of art: not just an academic work, which searches for laws, rules and objective truths, but a personal vision inspired by intuition.

Although Auerbach never mentions it, we can safely add to the list of great comparative syntheses written by single authors, his very own book, *Mimesis,* which takes as a starting point the idea of representation of reality in the literature of Western Europe, and also Walter Muschg's *Tragische Literaturgeschichte*, whose starting points seem to be more difficult to understand.[1] These two books, in addition to Curtius's *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, were written during the Second World War and were all published in the same year, and all three present only a small part of that six thousand year long tradition written in fifty languages: only the literature of the European West. It is not only difficult to say that these three books, the best of what has been seen so far, fulfil the requirements of *world* literature, but since their publication half a century ago no one has attempted to write anything remotely as ambitious. Auerbach's pessimism regarding the possibility of writing a history of world literature seems even more justifiable if we recall that the number of literary languages and new national literatures only increased from the time of the publication of his article. Of all contemporary authors who examined the prospects of a

world literary history, only Spivak optimistically overlooks the difficulty posed by the existence of so many languages in writing about 'Planetary' literature; everybody else agree that the criteria of sound scholarship established by the great comparative literature scholars of Auerbach's time must be changed if we are ever to see any results.

The pessimistic outlook is justified as long as we understand world literature as being the sum of national literatures, but it seems that this was not what Goethe had in mind when he invented the concept. Interpreting those twenty references to *Weltliteratur* in Goethe's writings, Fritz Strich concluded that Goethe had not had in mind an aggregate of all books ever written, but

> the literature which mediates between national literatures and nations in general, and which exchanges their ideal goods. It encompasses everything which, by way of literature, helps nations to learn about, understand, judge and tolerate each other, everything which brings them closer and ties them together. This is a literary bridge or a spiritual road over rivers and mountains which separate peoples. This is a spiritual exchange of goods, an international trade in ideas, a world literary market where peoples bring their goods for exchange. These images from the world of trade and the market were adopted enthusiastically by Goethe himself to clarify his idea.(Strich, 5).

Thus, it is not the sum of human literary production, but only a small segment of it: only that which crosses the borders of nations in order to find a home in other traditions as well. Although Auerbach was very aware of Goethe's understanding of *Weltliteratur*, the overall meaning of his article, especially in the light of the difficulties he lists, tends to favour the idea of world literature as an aggregate. Complaining about the process of standardisation – what we call globalisation today – which makes the planet smaller day by day and diminishes differences between cultures, Auerbach envisaged the coming into being of a single literary culture and the prospect of using a single literary language, and hastened to warn the reader that, if this process is allowed to unfold undisturbed, 'the idea of world literature would be at the same time realised and destroyed'. This was not what Goethe had in mind when he coined the term: '*Weltliteratur* does not refer to what is simply human and common to all, but to the mutual fecundation of what is different'. (Auerbach 39). We can safely say that this dark vision of the literature of the lowest common denominator has already come true in that part of literature which is usually referred to as commercial, and which David Damrosch proposes that it should be called 'global literature' in order to underline its difference from *Weltliteratur*. (Damrosch 25). For, although it crosses the borders between nations as if there were none, it is only a travesty of the idea of the fruitful mutual enrichment between cultures.

The second half of the twentieth century was certainly not the time of great historical syntheses, but the time of literary theory. With the exception of Jauss' challenge, which found great theoretical, but next to none historical resonance, literary criticism during this period focused on all other aspects of literature, save its historical one. The simultaneous discussions on history writing, on the one hand, and the poststructuralist questioning of narrative frames in general, on the other, certainly did not encourage innovative literary history. Only in the late nineties did interest in literary history resurface, this time supported by the results of debates held on philosophy, and the methodology of history writing.[2] The pressure exercised by postcolonial theory, primarily over the problem of cannon formation, and the increasing awareness of the processes of cultural globalization, eventually brought about the reassessment of the questions surrounding world literature: how it can be understood today, and whether it is possible to envisage its synthesis.

Over the last decade two systematic attempts were made to revive the idea of such a synthesis. The main problem is, however, much the same as in Auerbach's time: how to synthesize such a vast amount of material, and how to find a thread which may help compose it as a meaningful whole. The first proposal follows a refined understanding of Goethe's idea: not all literature is of interest, but only the works which cross spatial and temporal borders. Following this we are left with a significantly reduced corpus, but we shall shortly see that the nature of that reduction is what gives cause for concern. The second attempt does not give up the idea of the aggregate of all works, but claims that instead of trying to reduce the corpus, we should constitute our object under study differently.

The author of the first project is Pascale Casanova, who in her book *La République mondiale des lettres* introduces the idea of the world literary space. This space has its own temporality, which means that its history can be written irrespective of the political history of the planet, although the same categories will be found in both: inequality between the centre and periphery, domination and resistance, revolutions and competition. This book advocates a shift from the older paradigm of *world literature*, impregnated by Auerbach's philological pessimism, to the new paradigm of a *literary world*, which, although huge in scope, does not necessarily need to be unrepresentable. Casanova explains the difference in the following manner: the 'conceptual tool is not "world literature" itself – that is, the body of literature expanded to a world scale […] but a *space*: a set of interconnected positions, which must be thought of and described in relational terms. At stake are not the modalities of analysing literature on a world scale, but the conceptual means for thinking of literature *as* a world.' (Casanova, "Liter.")

The world literary space comes into being through several phases. The first phase took place during the 16th century in Italy and France, when a common field of literature was created between formerly isolated areas. In both countries the domination of Latin was challenged, which simultaneously brought about the struggle for supremacy between French and Tuscan. Soon this space was widened to accommodate Spain and England, and as a result of the 'Herderian revolution' the spaces of Central Europe and of both Americas joined in. (Casanova, *La République* 110). During the last phase, which took place in the 20th century, this international space eventually allowed in the decolonised countries of Africa and Asia. It does sound unusual when Casanova claims that one of the oldest literary traditions on the planet, namely that of China, joined the world literary space only in the 20th century, but this apparent paradox aptly illustrates Casanova's main idea: the riches and longevity of a tradition do mean a lot, but they are not crucial for entering into the world literary space. Only when the reading elite of a country becomes familiar with the traditions of others, be it in the original or in translation, or when a given tradition begins to welcome translations itself, can one claim that this tradition has been integrated into the world literary space. Needless to say, those who write in widely spoken languages, such as French and English, are privileged and do not need to rely on translations. Nevertheless, Casanova never suggests that the world literary space is a domain of harmony and justice. On the contrary: hierarchy and violence, domination and conflict are the main characteristics of its economy.

Every national literature is structured around two poles: the national and international. The national one does not necessarily mean 'nationalistic', it rather refers to literature's structural dependence on the national-political domain. Consequently, the national pole of every literature is heteronomous, while the international one is autonomous, which in this context should be taken to mean 'dedicated to literature itself'. We can speak of literature's autonomy when it is not being legitimized by anything external to it, or 'when literary space translates the political and national game into its own specific terms – aesthetic, formal, narrative and poetic'. (Casanova, *La République* 124). The 'Herderian revolution' only made explicit what was characteristic of even the oldest literary spaces in Europe (such as the French one): literature's structural dependency on political and national instances. The autonomous pole in a national literature is a result of a long process of loosening the original tie between a language, a nation and its literature, or between a literature and a nation which had been created with literature's assistance. This is why the autonomous pole can be found only in literary spaces which have long histories, and have thus had enough time to accumulate sizable literary capital.

While national writers incorporate the national-political conception of literature, those on its international pole incorporate the autonomy of literature, although this is always only relative. They are the ones who have mastered the rules of the world literary space, and by using this knowledge in order to subvert the norms of their own national field, they widen the space of autonomy. At the same time, they also help to bring about a gradual unification of the world literary space, which cannot come into being without breaking the link between literature and the national-political sphere. At the end of the book, Casanova intimates that this threefold process – autonomization, internalization and unification – can be understood as the aim of what we used to call 'literary evolution': 'What was here referred to as the genesis of the literary space, in fact is a slow, painful and difficult process, full of ceaseless struggles and enmities, by which literary freedom is created in spite of all limitations (political, national, linguistic, commercial, and diplomatic) imposed on it.' (Casanova, *La République* 180). It follows that the aim of literary evolution is the state of literary autonomy, or the global *literarization* and de-nationalization of literature. De-nationalized is that literature which can become the property of others as much as of those language communities which create it, or to put it differently, literarized literature is that which can include in itself the books and authors who have broken free from the constraints of their own national-political space.

The world literary space is also structured by the autonomous-international and heteronomous-national poles. The position of all national literatures between the two depends on the degree of autonomy which a particular literature reached. And since autonomy is only gained slowly and by accumulating 'literary resources', it means that the centre of the world literary space consists of the oldest and the most autonomous literatures. While France alone served as the centre of the world literary space in the nineteenth century – this conclusion prompting several commentators to accuse Casanova of being French- or even Paris-centred (Damrosch 27; Prendergast 8–9) – the twentieth century brought about a polycentric structure, with Paris, London, New York, Frankfurt and Barcelona as the centres which competed for the power to decide which authors represent the absolute present of literature. Because these cities were the locations of the most powerful publishers, the most influential magazines and media in general, and the dwellings of those whom Casanova brands 'the authorities with the power to consecrate', they were magnets for international writers who were struggling for autonomy and recognition in the world literary space. But these cities did not structure the real map of the world literary space. Instead, it was structured by the invisible Greenwich

meridian of literary time, which decrees what is the centre and what is the periphery. Borges became an international writer when his books had been translated in Paris and consecrated by the authorities residing there, but it does not mean that at that moment the Greenwich literary meridian, the absolute centre of modernity, had passed through Paris. It was defined instead by the aesthetic, formal, narrative and poetic aspects of Borges' works. Faulkner's consecration also took place in Paris, but at that time the Greenwich literary meridian passed through all those writers, coming from all the Souths of the planet, who while remaining faithful to their cultural heritage and their archaic rural worlds, and to their lives caught in the trap of their families and villages, nevertheless managed to reach the point of absolute present. That was, Casanova claims, the 'Faulknerian revolution' which set the new standards of modernity, pretty much as the former 'Joycean revolution' did the same for the previous generation.

These examples show that the Greenwich literary meridian is neither static nor material, and that the world literary map never stops changing. One's distance from the Greenwich meridian is a distance in time, not in space: the naturalist novel today could not be any further from it, but the naturalist novel is written both in the national literary spaces which are poor in 'resources' and geographically distant from the centres, and in the commercial areas at the very centre of the world literary space.

The conceptual framework which Casanova takes over from Braudel and Bourdieu gives her analysis of the literary world a certain flair more commonly found in histories of economies. To justify this, she reminds the reader that Valéry also wrote of culture as if of a form of capital, and that the tendency to view world literature as a market where peoples bring their goods for exchange was present in the first naming of that idea – namely Goethe's. (Casanova, *La République* 25–28). However, there is a moment when this extended economist metaphor, useful as it may be, begins to influence the notion of literary value. Consistent with her general framework of a market for exchanging non-marketable values, and of a non-economic economy, Casanova describes literary value as *that which is considered valuable*. What is considered valuable, however, is decided by the authorities from the privileged centres of the world literary space, whose approval is necessary if one strives for recognition beyond one's national and linguistic borders. This is, of course, one further form of domination, and Casanova never denies it: in the case of small European nations, she writes, 'the effects of the linguistic and literary domination are still so strong that they can prevent, or at least make difficult, unbiased recognition and consecration of those who write in "small" languages'. (377). Casanova describes several courses of action which writers in small

languages can take if they still want to be recognized: they need to impose themselves on the authorities in the centre, to struggle for translations of their works, and if everything else fails, they can start writing in another, more 'visible' language (as did Strindberg, Nabokov or Kundera). In a word, they need to be marketable in the market, if they want their work to be considered valuable.

There is, however, a contradiction in this apt description, which everyone can recognize as true to the point of being a truism. Casanova's understanding of literary value is descriptive and pragmatic: value is whatever is considered valuable. One may ask, considered by whom? The reader is allowed to presume that, in the conceptual framework of the market for exchanging non-marketable values, and of the non-economic economy, it is the consumers who should carry out the considering part. In recent years, the books considered as the most valuable by market criteria include the Harry Potter series and Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*. It is difficult to imagine that Casanova would agree with this, for she also, as Auerbach before or Damrosch after her, implicitly but nevertheless clearly distinguishes between 'high' literature and the purely commercial. The latter is more international than the former, and easily crosses national and linguistic borders, so why wouldn't we accept it for Goethe's vision of *Weltliteratur* which came true? Because, everybody would say, that literature has no value, although it is somehow *considered* valuable on the market.

It is a strange sort of market and economy, in which the consumers have no say in matters of value, and only the consecrating authorities in the centres of the world literary space have the right to decide what is considered valuable. Moreover, even if we accept this at face value, another contradiction will spring up: Casanova explicitly says that there are values which the market has not yet recognized. Literary value is defined at the same time as that which is considered valuable by the consecrated authorities, and that which they *not yet* consider as such, but they might if given a chance to read it. To put it differently: did the Latin American novel have any quality, while it still existed only at the periphery of the literary world and before it had been translated into French, a quality which made possible its subsequent recognition in Paris? If not, then the literary recognition in the centres does not amount to much more than to the effects of marketing and visibility, and the authorities in the centres can declare valuable anything they please. If this is so, then using the notion of literary value makes no sense any more, and we must give up the implicit but fundamental distinction between commercial and high literature. This brings us again to the core of Auerbach's pessimism: 'the idea of world literature

[is] at the same time realised and destroyed', and we should not bother any more with trying to write a history of something that is only a travesty of the idea of the fruitful mutual enrichment between cultures. That sort of history should be written by marketing specialists.

However, if the Latin American novel possessed some quality, while it was still at the periphery of the literary world, a quality which was subsequently only recognised in Paris, then the literary value is – that very quality. If this is the case, then literary value exists regardless of its recognition in the centres of the world literary space, and cannot be described as that which is considered valuable. Literary value is obviously something more, or at least something different to this, and the metaphor of the non-economic economy, which is the fundament of Casanova's book, is not a suitable framework for understanding it.

Can we simply overlook this contradiction, and proceed to write a history of world literature, following the patterns highlighted by Casanova in this enormously rich, erudite and well documented book? In order to do so, we would first need to know what this history would address. If it is about books which are considered valuable in the world market, then not only can we not exclude commercial literature, but we must give it priority. It is difficult to foresee how we could make any space in it for Octavio Paz, when so much space will be taken up by the likes of Barbara Cartland. And if it is about books considered valuable by the consecrating authorities in the publishing and media centres, whose limited linguistic and cultural horizon Casanova has already described, then the proper title of such a book would not be *A History of World Literature*, but only *A History of Literature Noticed in the Centres*. This would be possible, but it would be something altogether different from Goethe's idea of *Weltliteratur*.

The author of the second proposal for revitalising the writing of history of world literature is Franco Moretti. His approach can be classified as directly opposed to that of Auerbach's. Moretti sides with the colloquial meaning of *Weltliteratur*: it is the sum of literary production in all languages and at all times. However, while Auerbach insisted on a personal perspective and the intuition of a sole researcher, Moretti proposes teamwork; while Auerbach imagined a history which would be closer to a work of art than to a proper academic study, Moretti expects justifiable results and scientific laws. And, last but not least, while Auerbach began every chapter in *Mimesis* with the analysis of a textual segment which might stand for a whole epoch, Moretti does not envisage any textual analysis and claims that only by giving up on close reading can we manage to cover the whole field. The only point of agreement between Auerbach and Moretti is the conclusion that not even the smallest part of the vast field can be covered

by a single reader. If a researcher decides to read a canon of the hundred most important nineteenth century British novels (and Moretti reminds his reader that one hundred is a very high number for a canon), it will still represent only 0.5 per cent of all novels published in Britain in that period. (Moretti, "The Slaught." 207). The remaining 95.5 per cent Moretti calls 'the great unread'. What are we to do with the unread novels? 'Reading "more" is always a good thing, but not the solution', says Moretti.

> [T]he sheer enormity of the task makes it clear that world literature cannot be literature, but bigger; what we are already doing, just more of it. The *categories* have to be different. […] World literature is not an object, it's a *problem*, and a problem that asks for a new critical method; and no-one has ever found a method by just reading more texts. (»Conject.« 149).

Writing a history of world literature is an impossible task if it is to be understood as a series of interpretations or 'close readings', because the researcher must limit himself to a small number of texts which are taken very seriously: 'you invest so much in individual texts *only if* you think that very few of them really matter.' (»Conject.« 151). For a huge number of texts an altogether different method is needed, a method which will at the same time construct a different object of the discipline called history of world literature. There is no doubt that literary texts would remain the objects under study, writes Moretti, but 'they are not the right objects for literary history'. (*Graphs* 76). The new and appropriate method should focus on what is smaller and larger than texts: on 'devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems. And if, between the very small and the very large, the text itself disappears, well, it is one of those cases when one can justifiably say, Less is more.' (»Conject.« 151). This is to be understood as a history parallel to the history of literary texts: following a phenomenon, perceptible only at the microscopic level, through a huge number of texts, which are inaccessible to a single researcher, and as a construction of a system of differences which eventually helps describe something larger than an individual text, such as a description of the development of a genre.

When Jonathan Arac proposed the paradoxical name 'formalism without close reading' for Moretti's new method, Moretti responded ignoring the satirical intention and gladly agreed with the name. (Arac 81). The focus on form is quite obvious in all Moretti's books: his predominant topic is the unearthing of historical forces which created, shaped and changed the novel's forms. That this method can be applied to the vast field of world literature only if we give up close reading, Moretti said himself: 'a field this large cannot be understood by stitching together separate bits of knowledge about individual cases, because it *isn't* a sum of individual cases: it's a

collective system, that should be grasped as such, as a whole (…)'. (*Graphs* 4). Instead of reading closely himself, the historian will have to rely on close readings done by others. 'Distant reading' or 'second-hand' reading here means relying on 'other people's research, *without a single direct textual reading*. (…) [T]he ambition is now directly proportional *to the distance from the text*: the more ambitious the project, the greater must the distance be.' (*Graphs* 151). To prove that it bears results, Moretti sums up the conclusions of twenty researchers who studied the rise of the novel on four continents, over a period of two hundred years: independently from each other, they all came to the same conclusion that in peripheral cultures the novel appears as a result of a formal compromise between foreign plot, local characters, and local narrative voice. This conclusion, claims Moretti, can be considered as one of the laws of world literature.

The real task for Moretti's method is not textual interpretation of individual works, but construction of abstract models, which might be interpreted themselves only later:

> you *reduce* the text to few elements, and abstract them from the narrative flow, and construct a new, *artificial* object. A model. And at this point you start working at a "secondary level", removed from the text […]. Distant reading, I have called this work elsewhere; where distance is however not an obstacle, but *a specific form of knowledge*: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection. Shapes, relations, structures. Patterns.' (»Graphs« 94).

As Casanova in *La République mondiale des lettres*, so Moretti in *Graphs, Maps, Trees* using selected examples only illustrates the method which might be used for writing a history of world literature. Without a single textual interpretation, he charts the graphs of novel production in five national literatures (Great Britain, Japan, Italy, Spain, and Nigeria) and shows how first the appearance, and then the domination of the novel in the system of literary genres, everywhere followed the same pattern. The downturn in novel production always had censorship as a cause (the antipathy between the novel and politics, says Moretti), and sub-genres of the novel always appear and disappear in intervals which overlap with the appearance and disappearance of a generation of readers. The novel is here viewed as a wave, not as individual drops. In the second chapter of *Graphs, Maps, Trees* the abstract model takes the form of a map. Moretti claims that a map of a setting in a 'village novel' can be read as a map of ideology and mentality. It shows how the closed, self-contained pre-industrial world explodes under the influence of a force coming from the outside (industrialization), and thus makes obvious the relation between a social conflict and literary form. The third chapter introduces evolutionary trees which graphically

represent the development of a genre, such as the detective story, or a narrative device, such as free indirect style. In the case of the detective story, a tree shows how the introduction of a device – the 'key' in A. C. Doyle's stories – influenced the development of this genre in the nineteenth century, and how it sentenced a large part of the production to oblivion: the tree also shows the authors who did not know how to use this device, or those who used it in the wrong manner, and thus lost their audience and quickly disappeared from the scene. 'But instead of reiterating the verdict of the market, abandoning extinct literature to the oblivion decreed by its initial readers, these trees take the lost 99 per cent of the archive and reintegrate it into the fabric of literary history, allowing us to finally "see" it.' (*Graphs* 77). This is what comparative literature could be, says Moretti, if it would only take itself seriously as world literature, on the one hand, and as comparative morphology, on the other. (90). It should be noted that while Casanova bases her vision of the world literary space on the idea of value, understood as the judgement of the consecrating authorities, Moretti's vision of world literature excludes all value judgements, irrespective of their origin: neither the market, nor the consecrating authorities should stand in the way of the historian who ought to recognize all writing as equally valuable and deserving of inclusion.

Moretti emphasises that graphs, maps and trees are only different faces of the same explanatory procedure, and are quite independent from textual interpretation. However, only graphs can be granted interpretation-free status: only they can be assembled on the basis of bibliographies of national literatures and without resorting to reading. A map of the plot of a village novel can be derived only through reading (who does the latter is irrelevant) and will be of limited value unless supplemented by an interpretation. Moreover, a map only restates what an interpretation has already supplied: in Moretti's example, the disappearance of the village culture mentality, and of the ideology which created its literary form. The interpretation, however, can survive even without a map, which here only serves the purpose of graphic illustration. Something similar can be said about Moretti's second example: the social aspect of free indirect style can be explained if the novels in which it can be found are contextually interpreted; the evolutionary tree graphically orders these interpretations, and lays them out clearly – but it cannot substitute them. Maps and evolutionary trees hardly constitute a new subject; they only graphically represent the same old one – whoever is charged with the job of reading and interpreting.

Moreover, how are we to know what we are looking for to be represented in graphs, maps and trees, if not on the basis of a previous interpretation of what is to be found? Auerbach might have had exactly that in

mind when he wrote that one always finds the starting point by following one's intuition, and that a successful history would have its starting point centrally placed, so that one can reach, starting from it, as much as possible. No starting point guarantees a total vision, and something will always be missed, as Curtius missed everything that did not bear a mark of rhetorical tradition, or as Auerbach himself overlooked everything that did not represent reality. The most cautious way, then, would be to start from as many points as possible, hoping that the net would be so tight that nothing could slip through it. Stylistic devices, genres and their transformations and migrations, motifs, types, metaphors and symbols, plots – how many starting points are we able to imagine? A million? A hundred million? No one could predict that, and at the beginning of such an enormous task we could only hope for a vision of the *whole* to appear eventually. This is how the problem of the enormous number of texts to be read, thrown out of the window, creeps back through the chimney as the problem of the enormous number of starting points to follow. History of literature, after all, remains a melancholic discipline: as one can never read everything, so one can never claim to have predicted all envisaged starting points from which to tell the story of literature. Moretti borrows Darwin's evolutionary tree, but he overlooks the fact that Darwin's was a much simpler task: he did not have to, even if it had been somehow feasible, to examine every living creature that walked the earth from the moment life had begun until the nineteenth century. He only constructed a hypothetical model, which would have never been finished had he had to, either himself or with an army of assistants, examine every single blade of grass. A history of world literature would have to do that, if it would intend to remain a history, because if it were not to, it would never know what it had overlooked. Darwin wanted to explain why these specific life forms evolved and survived, but he did not make an exhaustive list of the extinct ones. This is exactly what a history of world literature must do, because it cannot dispose of its extinct species, or even individual examples, such as a forgotten metaphor, and still claim to have surveyed the whole of literature.

But, does one really have to? Moretti seems to believe that a historian of literature must do this, and this gives his project a distinct heroic flair. However, this is exactly the point where his project begins to resemble the two earlier ones: namely the positivistic history of literature, and structuralism. It seems that in every other generation of literary scholars, approximately every half a century, the aim of creating a vision of the whole, which will be scientifically proven and justifiable, reappears. Both the positivists and the structuralists were suspicious of arbitrary and intuitive hypotheses, and refused to be satisfied with only partial results. They both yearned for

scientific exactness and a vision of the whole, and expected that the final aim would be achieved in a distant future. The positivists believed that after exhausting and tedious work on accumulating all collectable data, including elements only remotely connected with the object under study, the vision of the whole would appear all by itself, if only enough facts had been assembled. The structuralists hoped that equally hard work on assembling all possible structures would lead, once the critical point had been reached, to fitting them all into a structure of structures, the ultimate answer to all questions, which equals the vision of the whole. It is worth remembering that both projects were abandoned before any vision of the whole was reached.

It seems that the answer to my initial question must be negative. A unified perspective is impossible in surveying such an enormous field. In order to limit the field, we need to rely either on the market, or on tradition and consecrating authorities – which ultimately also rely on the market, having limited language skills and lacking a biblical life-span – or on oneself and one's intuition. The market is, everybody will agree, not trustworthy. As for intuitive hypotheses, I would trust Auerbach's, but not many others' – not even my own. The conclusion seems to be straightforward: there can be no reliable selection, no universally accepted value judgements, no unified perspective, and hence no reliable, objective, all-encompassing narrative of world literature.

However, if we cease to conceptualize world literature in terms inherited from histories of national literatures, the conclusion may seem less melancholic. We are used to understanding culture in terms of ownership, be it national, group or private, whereas a history has the function of ledgers, keeping track of production, accumulation, prices, exports and imports. Although the model Casanova adapted from Braudel and Bourdieu allows for shared ownership, the underlying conception of property is still there. However, we may try to imagine world literature as something which cannot be possessed, as, for instance, a conversation. '*Seit ein Gespräch wir sind*', 'since we are a conversation' – this verse of Hölderlin's should resonate, with all its implications, in every cultural analysis. As beings of culture, we are but conversations. A conversation belongs to all those who take part in it: none of the participants can lay claim to it, and even those who silently listen may be considered to be participants. We may try to imagine world literature not as one, but as many very complex, contradictory and simultaneous conversations. If we try to minute all of them, and to transform the minutes into a unified narrative, the result would not make much sense. What is more, if we chose to make a selection from the minutes – taking, for instance, only the remarks in the languages we understand, or, provided

we understood them all, taking only those which would lend themselves to being interwoven in a unified narrative, or only those which we deem brilliant – we would necessarily falsify the conversation, and someone, or many participants, would be misrepresented. However, since so many voices take part in this conversation, no harm will be done if many scribes simultaneously do the writing and reconstructing, and if each of them tries to compose a narrative independently of others, but as close as possible to the recorded part of the conversation. Unity of the perspective ought not to be demanded from a reconstruction of something which is by its very nature non-unified, complex and contradictory, which spreads out in many different directions, ebbs and flows, and always takes part only in groups of an ever changing group of members – without plenary sessions, to use an expression appropriate for this occasion. Such a record will necessarily be complex and contradictory, and will never succeed in recording everything, but at least it will not be intentionally reductive, because the recorders would not rely on market forces, authority and tradition, or intuition. The history of world literature is impossible if we expect it to be written from a unified perspective, available only to single researchers, because it would demand either a sharp reduction in what is read, following value judgements which always prove to be arbitrary, or because it would demand giving up reading altogether. It is also impossible as an account of one clearly defined phenomenon, not only because such clear demarcations are reductive, but also because the phenomenon under investigation in the discipline of writing a history of world literature, produced over so many centuries and in so many different languages and cultures, lacks a clear definition. The most we can hope for is a plural, multi-perspective record of the long conversation, in which many voices will be allowed to be heard, perhaps talking about altogether different things.

NOTES

[1] Muschg was one of the two editors of *Festschrift* in which Auerbach published this article. Auerbach's remark about the insufficiency of abstract categories as starting points for literary history might be directed to Muschg, whose ambitiously written *Tragische Literaturgeschichte* failed to display a clear unity of perspective.

[2] A good summary of the recent debates on literary history writing can be found in Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés (eds.).

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Jasno opredeljen pojem in enotna perspektiva: ali je zgodovina svetovne književnosti mogoča?

Ključne besede: literarna zgodovina / svetovna književnost / Auerbach, Erich / Casanova, Pascale / Moretti, Franco

Pred več kot petdesetimi leti je Erich Auerbach postavil dve glavni vprašanji v zvezi s pisanjem zgodovine svetovne književnosti: kako sintetizirati takšno ogromno količino gradiva in kako najti nit, ki ga bo pomagala sestaviti v smiselno celoto V zadnjem desetletju sta bila narejena dva sistematična poskusa obujanja ideje takšne sinteze. Avtorica prvega je Pascale

Casanova, ki je v svoji knjigi *La République mondiale des lettres* vpeljala idejo svetovnega literarnega prostora. V skladu s svojim splošnim okvirom trga za izmenjavo netržnih vrednosti oziroma neekonomske ekonomije opisuje P. Casanova literarno vrednost kot tisto, *kar velja za vredno*. Toda nejasno ostaja, čigava vrednostna sodba je tu odločilna: sodba posvečujočih avtoritet v središčih svetovnega literarnega prostora ali sodba širšega mednarodnega bralstva? Poleg tega P. Casanova izrecno pravi, da obstajajo vrednosti, ki jih trg še ni prepoznal. Literarna vrednost je opredeljena kot tisto, kar velja za vrednost pri posvečenih avtoritetah, in obenem kot tisto, kar pri njih *še ne* velja za takšno, a bi utegnilo veljati, če bi imele to priložnost prebrati. Glede na težave pri določanju pojma literarne vrednosti metafora neekonomske ekonomije, ki je temelj knjige P. Casanova, ni primeren okvir za zgodovino svetovne književnosti. – Avtor drugega projekta je Franco Moretti. Za Morettijevo metodo prava naloga ni besedilna interpretacija posameznih del, ampak tvorba abstraktnih modelov (grafikonov, zemljevidov in dreves), ki jih je mogoče interpretirati šele pozneje. A če pred temi modeli ni interpretacije, ki bi nam povedala, kaj naj sploh iščemo, moramo začeti s toliko izhodišč, kolikor je le mogoče. Tako se problem, ki smo ga prej vrgli skozi okno, namreč problem ogromnega števila besedil, ki jih je treba prebrati, priplazi nazaj skozi dimnik kot problem ogromnega števila izhodišč, ki jim moramo slediti. Morettijev načrt v tem spominja na zgodnejša dva: namreč na pozitivistično zgodovino literature in na strukturalizem, in spomniti se velja, da so oba projekta opustili, še preden so dosegli kakršnokoli vizijo celote.

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