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# WORLD LITERATURE, A DECENTRED SPHERE

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Por

**Jorge Acero Portilla**

The University of Edinburgh

[jard90@gmail.com](mailto:jard90@gmail.com)

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**Abstract:** Franco Moretti and Pascale Casanova’s accounts of world literature are coded in metaphors. The former employs a core-periphery system to examine the unequal relationships between national literatures; the latter sees world literature as a ‘world literature of letters’, wherein the exchanges between literary traditions take place following economic patterns. This essay discusses to what extent these metaphors are inadequate to analyse the current trends of world literature as they portray the so-called central literatures as unidirectional forces that inform the canon, thereby shaping the literary production. This perspective privileges an economical jargon which constitutes an ideological bias resulting in the homogenisation of the literary value. This article takes a different approach by offering an alternative metaphor to explain world literature and its dynamics. This metaphor is a decentred sphere without a circumference. In order to illustrate this point, William Ospina’s *El año del verano que nunca llegó* (2015) is analysed, focusing on its worldly elements.

**Keywords:** World Literature, Metaphors, World Republic of Letters, National literatures, William Ospina, Franco Moretti, Pascale Casanova.



## Introduction

In his brief essay “The Pascal’s Sphere” (1997), Argentine author Jorge Luis Borges suggests that “[p]erhaps the universal history is the history of a handful of metaphors”<sup>1</sup> (14). The sphere, he argues, is a recurrent image that has helped humanity, from Xenophanes of Colophon to Blaise Pascal, to understand the universe. First employed by Hermes Trismegistus, this metaphor described God as “an intelligible sphere whose centre is everywhere and its circumference nowhere” (16). Borges notes that this geometric figure lost its theological aura following the secularisation posed by the Copernican astrology that displaced God’s creation and, by the same token, God himself, from the centre of the universe. Centuries later, Pascal would depict nature as “an infinite sphere whose centre is everywhere and its circumference is nowhere” (19).

Similarly, one may argue that the history of world literature, or at least its theorisation, is the history of some metaphors. Indeed, a number of scholars have put forward their definition of this elusive concept by employing diverse images or analogies, typically maps, *bodies* of works, or international markets. The vocabulary used by those academics tends to conform to their proposed metaphor thereby conditioning what they can name, describe and study. This essay will particularly focus on Franco Moretti (2000) and Pascale Casanova's (2004) metaphors (a core-periphery system and a republic of letters, respectively) since their works have been influential in the contemporary discussion of world literature as a term. I will highlight their limitations, while formulating a post-Copernican definition of this concept, namely a desacralised metaphor in which the centre of literary production and consumption is everywhere and the circumference (or rather periphery) is nowhere. I will argue, therefore, that world literature is the decentralised sphere in which cultures communicate and interact through their literatures. To illustrate and test my definition, I will take *El año del verano que nunca llegó* (2015) by Colombian writer William Ospina as an example of world literature, discussing its formal and content features that I consider are worthy of such label.

### Discussing core-periphery models

As I suggested above, world literature is an elusive term whose problematic definition has occupied a number of theorists in the rise of the current century since Franco Moretti's *Conjectures on world literature* (2000) brought the concept into discussion. However, this notion can be traced back to Eckermann's account of his conversations with Goethe (1850), who coined the term *Weltliteratur*<sup>2</sup>. This involves Goethe's pretension to deprovincialize national literatures aiming at a world literature whereby a 'spiritual' commerce between nations takes place. Nevertheless, this German author states that this literary intercourse is not a free and equal exchange of *cultural goods*. For him, the Ancient Greek literature is the only tradition of real worth, whereas "the rest we must look at only historically; appropriating to ourselves what is good, so far as it goes" (2011, p.351).

In the light of this conception, world literature is a for-profit endeavour framed in the global trade relations in which European literatures exploit the materials and themes of 'less-endowed' literary traditions. Echoing this seminal inequality, Moretti (2000) proposes a core-periphery system in which the centre (comprised of western literary traditions) is the source from which all literary validation and production derives. In this scenario, the periphery has a marginal participation in world literature. It is worth noting that the economic-based jargon pervades Moretti's description of the system as he makes use of terms such as *importing the novel*, *foreign debt*, *direct and indirect loans*. Advancing this tendency of employing economic phraseology, Pascale Casanova (2004) describes literature as a map or literary republic based on a 'market' in which writers compete against each other to gain recognition. This is, according to her, what gives life to international literature.

For Casanova, it is possible to measure the literariness of a language or a nation (this is its literary *capital*) “not in terms of the number of writers and readers it has, but in terms of the number of cosmopolitan intermediaries -publishers, editors, critics, and especially translators” (21). Casanova also suggests that one indicator that can be employed to verify the volume of literary *capital* of a nation is the number of books published per year for every 100,000 inhabitants (358). There are at least two questions that one may ask while examining this proposal. Firstly, is Casanova really attempting to weigh the literariness of a nation or is she measuring the size of its literary industry? Secondly, in suggesting that the literary capitals are measurable, is Casanova losing sight of the cultural element of literatures that makes them unexchangeable? My main criticism here lays in the sense of alterity of the definition of literature. I am reluctant to think that every culture has had the same definition of literature across time and space.

The homogenisation of the literariness operates at a deeper level in the analytical apparatus of a number of scholars, including Casanova and Moretti, but also Siskind (2010) and Walkowitz (2015). By considering the novel as the single unit of analysis (or the genre on which they construct their units of analysis: devices, themes, tropes), these authors engage in an ideological bias since this literary artefact emerged and was predominantly cultivated in Europe. I am not opposing the study of the novel, but I am encouraging the inclusion of other works, especially those of hybrid nature that challenge the notion of genre. In short, I am contrary to the idea of the novel being the common currency of this imagined transnational market.

Besides the flagrant universalisation of literary value, there seems to be a paradox in both Moretti and Casanova’s work. The former insists that there is not a perfect correspondence between the world literary system and the economic one, while the latter asserts that her world republic of letters features its own boundaries and dynamics independently from national and political geography. However, to my understanding, both scholars end up placing a Western (not to say plainly European) point at the core of their literary system and thereby reinforcing the political or economic reality they try to distance from.

Mads Rosendahl Thomsen (2010) undertakes the task of breaking with this model by propounding *temporary sub-centres* of literary creation. Taking those sub-centres into account, Thomsen argues, would enable us to “write a more realistic story of discontinued influence in a system of shifting centres” (40). He also claims that sub-centres will assist us with the description of the evolution of world literature, tracing what may have been omitted, as well as the redefinition of the theory of influence (39). However, abandoning this binary model is just one of the steps towards a more comprehensive understanding of world literature. We need to rethink and redefine its notions, actors and concepts, jettisoning the ideologically charged terminology associated with the economic sphere.

## Reinvention of a vocabulary for world literature

The close link between the pervasive economic jargon in Moretti and Casanova's work and the theorisation of world literature may be the *product* of the intensification of globalisation in the international political-economic context in the rise of this new century. Associated phenomena such as mass-migration, flexible movements of capital and *cultural goods*, the emergence of the Internet, and the increasing interconnectedness and interdependence between national markets have undoubtedly change the way we conceive, read and produce literature. Furthermore, the growing interest in world literature we have seen from the 2000's onwards may respond to the same international factors. In this regard, rethinking and redefining the conceptual body of world literature is not an attempt to deny the economic forces and influences intervening in the literary sphere. On the contrary, I suggest to conquest a certain degree of independence for the field of literary studies from the economic system by being mindful of the metaphors and language used to approach world literature.

To that end, I will focus on a concept that is key to the formulation of my proposed metaphor: translation. As I stated before, I understand world literature as the decentralised sphere in which cultures communicate and interact through their literatures. Therefore, one of the crucial notions to be redefined is the phenomenon of translation since it fosters the circulation of literary works between nations making them accessible to a broader audience. In fact, Rebecca Walkowitz (2015) points out the same necessity of a "new vocabulary for talking about the relationship between original works and works in translation" (45). For this author, translation is not just the mere transposition of a text into another language, but it is rather an operation incorporated in the process of creation, especially in contemporary novels by Murakami and Bolaño, among others<sup>3</sup>. Hence, this approach to translation challenges the correspondence of language and geography: "many contemporary works will seem to occupy more than one place, to be produced in more than one language, or to address multiple audiences at the same time" (6). Walkowitz's idea of translation pluralises the forms in which languages and cultures come into contact: these cultural exchanges also take place in the literary work itself and, perhaps more importantly, in its process of composition. On the other hand, the nearly simultaneous publication of some contemporary books in more than a language and country<sup>4</sup> seems to challenge the notion of centre of literary creation. This leads us to question where the alleged core of this world literature is located. Where is its periphery? I insist: the centre of this sphere is everywhere and its periphery is nowhere.

This decentralisation occurs at the authorial level as well. As translation is incorporated in the creative process, the figure of the translator is foregrounded. As regards the author, his or her centrality is shaken; he or she is forced to share some of the credit, some of the authorship over the multiple editions of the book. Likewise,

Walkowitz's understanding of translation debunks the notions of fidelity and originality; the work translated is not a mere copy of an original version and contemporary translation appears to be a matter of innovation. Walkowitz poses a provocative question following the publication of multiple editions of a work: is the work constituted by just one edition or is it constituted by its multiple editions (and translations)? Now we see that even the centrality of the first and pristine edition is lost.

### *El año del verano que nunca llegó*

The choice of William Ospina's *El año del verano que nunca llegó* (2015) as an example of world literature entails a paradox: this book has not been translated into any other language at the time I am writing these lines. We must bear in mind that translation and editorial circulation pays tribute to economic and political constraints. However, other works by this Colombian author have been translated and, thus, enjoyed a wider readership, particularly *Ursúa* (2005), which was considered as the best book of the year by Nobel laureate Gabriel García Márquez, and *El país de la canela* (2009). The latter gained Ospina the Rómulo Gallego award, the most prestigious literary prize for novels in Latin America.

This provocative decision is based on the hybrid nature of the genre of *El año del verano que nunca llegó* (2015) and the manner in which the book engages with cultural interconnectedness creating a different type decentralisation. As for the first aspect, we cannot easily classify this work under the category of a novel. In fact, the author asks himself whether the *El año del verano* "was a novel, an essay or travel journal?" (284). As Pablo Montoya (2016) duly notes, the book is all of that combined. Indeed, one of the central plots of the story (yes, the book has more than one!) is the set of incidents that took place in the night (June 16, 1816) in which the ideas for Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* and John William Polidori's *The Vampyre* were conceived. The book is also a treatise on English Romanticism, paying close attention to Lord Byron's life and work. On the other hand, the second central plot concerns the eclectic journey to compose the book. This is a physical, intellectual and metafictional journey that takes Ospina through times (19th, 20th and 21st centuries), a number of books and authors (ranging from Aurelio Arturo, Borges, Voltaire, Joyce, Chesterton, to García Márquez, Robert Browning and Henry James), and places (Cali, Buenos Aires, Geneva, London, Quito, Paris, among others).

I strongly believe that the hybridity of *El año del verano* defies the presumption that literature has a centralised, universal and unified value. This hybridity hinders the pretended literary commerce that takes place in Moretti and Casanova's models, because the study of this kind of works<sup>5</sup> complicates the use of the novel as the *common currency* in world literature. This diversifies the ways



in which cultures can interact, which is precisely one of the major achievements of Ospina's book. The interconnectedness between West and East, North and South is masterfully portrayed and dramatised. I will give the most evident example provided by the author in the initial pages of this story. A volcanic eruption on the remote Sumbawa island, in the Bali sea, is connected with the creation of the two of the most famous literary monsters: the vampire and Frankenstein. In 1815, mount Tambora expelled 180 km<sup>3</sup> of volcanic material into the atmosphere which caused in the following year the coldest summer that has been recorded in New England: a considerable number of birds, raccoons, deer and squirrels froze to death. Ospina claims that hundreds of thousands of people died in the port of Shanghai due to a massive flood. While one hundred thousand people drowned in the Yellow River, a hurricane devastated Pekin and even Emperor Jiaqing died in a fire sparked by a thunder that struck his tent.

The eruption had consequences in Europe, too. Ospina registers that the Greek islands were shadowed; darkness made appear wolves in the woods of Wallachia and Transylvania; the colour of snow that covered Hungary's countryside was meat-like; it rained for 142 consecutive days over Ireland; and there was a night that lasted for three days in a row... 1816 is known as the *year without a summer* and the Tambora eruption causing it reached Colombian writer William Ospina in Buenos Aires in the first years of the 21st century. Just like a sign of the time we live in, Ospina tells us that he discovered the subject of his book by browsing on the Internet. As it usually happens on the virtual world, one topic is linked to the other, and as Ospina was checking the spelling of Mary Wollstonecraft's surname, he found two books, one on Byron and another on Shelley. Both works omitted one particular aspect that was intriguing Ospina: those poets' encounter at Villa Diodati, a mansion nearby Lake Geneva, in Switzerland, during the night that lasted three consecutive days in the summer of 1816. That was the beginning of that vertiginous journey that led to the composition of *El año del verano que nunca llegó*.

A set of questions is suggested by the constant geographical and intellectual movement of the narrator throughout this book: is this a Colombian work? Does Ospina's nationality determine the book's 'citizenship'? Or, in other words, where can we locate the centre of *El año del verano que nunca llegó*? Where can we locate it in the core-periphery model of Moretti? Where in Casanova's world republic of letters? This book is a piece world literature because it pluralises the centre of enunciation and the stage on which the action takes place; it questions the notions of boundaries of genres and nations, which ultimately challenges the idea of peripheral literatures since there are not central ones either. *El año del verano* depicts the colourful variety of interconnections among cultures around the world, demonstrating that commerce is just one of the bonds that joins humanity together: Ospina's book seems to state that we are also connected through poetry, philosophy, the weather, our dreams, our nightmares, and the monsters that dwell in our nights.

In concluding this essay, I must admit that my vision of world literature might be haunted by a certain idea of egalitarianism, which can lead us to think that the interaction of cultures through their literatures occurs in a depoliticised and fair environment. Nevertheless, I believe that geopolitical forces and economic inequalities can be traced and analysed as relevant factors in this decentred sphere; postcolonial studies are not incompatible with my view, and power relations can be pondered in the historical and political context of cultural interaction. Two more pertinent aspects are worthy of further consideration: the role of the reader in a decentred world literature and whether canons, with their theological aura, are still a suitable notion. Another risk of my proposal is related to cosmopolitanism. As placing books, literatures and writers on a map is becoming progressively more problematic, we can be tempted to attribute them a 'global citizenship', which is just another manifestation of literary universalism and homogenisation. I reject that idea of world literature being a sort of ubiquitous phenomenon that erodes cultural specificities. My hypothesis is that pieces of world literature do not lose their cultural identity. On the contrary, their identities are pluralised and enriched by the multiple focal points these works seem to inhabit.



## Notas

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- 1 All translations of this text are mine.
- 2 B. Venkat Mani (2016) registers an earlier use of the term by Christoph Martin Wieland in 1801. Nevertheless, Mani acknowledges that Goethe was the first German intellectual who put *Weltliteratur* at issue.
- 3 Walkowitz mentions that the strategies employed by authors and translators to incorporate translation in the process of creation of *born-translated novels* can take several forms. See Walkowitz, 2015, pps. 14-16.
- 4 That is the case of Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) that was first published in Dutch and then in English, even though the author composed the novel in the latter language.
- 5 Contemporary examples of hybrid literary works are not scarce: *El hombre que no fue jueves* (2014) by Juan Esteban Constaín, *Tríptico de la infamia* (2015), *Los derrotados* (2012) and *La sed del ojo* (2004) by Pablo Montoya Campuzano.

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