

2 A Critique of Translation as a Force for Centralized Literary Consecration

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I was doodling with the numbers. On one side, I lined up the winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature until 2023, listed them by languages, and did not count languages that had only one laureate; on the other, I took the raw numbers of translations from those languages (as best I could, from the *Index Translationum* as of 2012 as processed by Ronen et al.) (Table 2.1). Despite all the technical inadequacies of the *Index* as a dataset, the correlation between the two lists gave a surprisingly high 0.97 – a very close match! How could that be? Why would the decisions of a handful of erudite Swedes, located in what appears to be a literary semi-periphery,¹ correlate so positively with an admittedly very rough image of global translation flows? Why should this correlation appear even when the translations in the *Index* are of all kinds of works, not just high literature?

At the most obvious level, the Nobel Prize is related to translation in two ways: first, many texts reach the Nobel selection process in translated forms; second, the Prize creates a value that stimulates further translations of the titles that gain publicity from it. Both those movements are part and parcel of what is perhaps the world's foremost consecration of high-end literary authors. The processes are particularly powerful because of the ideologies that inform the value created, which can be described as “transcendent” in the sense that is it supposed to be supra-commercial (numbers of book sales do not count) and supra-regional (one's country or part of the world is not supposed to count). Yet there is a third relation as well: translations themselves form a diffuse mode of non-transcendent consecration, as when the value of a work is gauged in terms of the number of versions it has accrued in different languages (with commercial consequences), chains of successive indirect translations compound that value (with further commercial consequences), and translations from a particular language open up channels and networks for further translations from that language (with decidedly regional consequences).

Table 2.1 Languages accorded more than one Nobel Prize in Literature, with languages by numbers of translations as at 2012 (from Ronen et al.)

<i>Nobel Prize</i>		<i>Index Translationum</i>		<i>L1 speakers</i>	
<i>Language</i>	<i>Prizes</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Translations</i>	<i>Language</i>	<i>Millions</i>
English	32	English	1,371,531	Chinese	939
French	16	German	493,842	Spanish	485
German	15	French	455,087	English	380
Spanish	11	Spanish	281,865	Russian	147
Swedish	7	Russian	184,167	Japanese	123
Italian	6	Japanese	157,814	French	81
Russian	6	Dutch	130,349	German	75
Polish	5	Italian	126,283	Italian	67
Norwegian	4	Swedish	110,880	Polish	41
Danish	3	Polish	90,824	Greek	13
Chinese	2	Portuguese	86,111	Swedish	11
Greek	2	Danish	86,038	Danish	6
Japanese	2	Czech	81,644	Norwegian	4
		Chinese	75,987		
		Hungarian	66,245		
		Norwegian	60,453		
		Greek	32,284		

That third relation, translation as a lesser mode of consecration, is methodologically problematic to the extent that it means my two quick variables are not really separate. In fact, they are confounded on two levels: first, the Nobel Prize is one form of consecration, and translations can be seen as another;² and second, the Prize needs and promotes translations, which therefore cannot be an independent variable. Prizes and translation flows would thus be two expressions of the same common cause, both pulling the same way. This could be like comparing, for example, grades in a science exam with grades in a mathematics exam, where the students with strong science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) skills come out on top in both. Or we might find that rising sales of white bread correlate with rising sales of brown bread, simply because more bread in general is being sold. Hence, the strong correlation. This same problem affects studies that, for example, use translations as a measure of a language's centrality (the more translations, the more the language is defined as being central)³ and then formulate hypotheses that map the numbers of translations onto the world language system (miraculously discovering that the more central languages have more translations).⁴ It is worth looking closely at our methodologies.

Does this confounding of variables explain away the high correlation? Perhaps not entirely. My quick calculations also indicate that out-translations (or “ex-translations”), the ones that go out of a language, have a high correlation with the languages of winners of the Nobel Prize in Literature ($r = 0.91$, $p < 0.001$), whereas the in-translations give a correlation that is weak and insignificant ($r = 0.56$, $p = 0.636$) (Table 2.2). A compatibly high correlation is found between the number of prizes in a language and the difference between that language’s in-translations and out-translations ($r = 0.80$, $p < 0.001$). On the other hand, it makes no statistical difference for a country to have a high gross domestic product (GDP) per capita. That is, in my small experiment, Nobel Prizes do *not* tend to go to large languages because they have large populations; they do *not* go to rich countries because they are rich; but they *do* tend to go to languages that have many more translations flowing out of them than flowing into them. That is more or less the sense in which we might model translations as entering a mechanism for consecration: there may be more or less truly great literary works in a language, but the numbers of translations *from* that language can add to a diffuse halo effect, retrospectively attributing transcendent value to the language, the literature, and the high-end authors.

Are these numbers therefore stating the obvious? Again, perhaps not entirely. They indicate, for example, that writers working in Swedish,

Table 2.2 Languages accorded more than one Nobel Prize in Literature, with languages by numbers of translations in 2012 (from Ronen et al.)

<i>Language</i>	<i>Prizes</i>	<i>Translations</i>	<i>In-translations</i>	<i>Out-translations</i>	<i>Difference</i>	<i>GDP/capita</i>
English	32	1,371,531	1,225,237	146,294	1,078,943	32,953
French	16	455,087	216,624	238,463	-21,839	15,103
German	15	493,842	201,718	292,124	-90,406	38,268
Spanish	11	281,865	52,955	228,910	-175,955	16,777
Swedish	7	110,880	39,192	71,688	-32,496	40,265
Italian	6	126,283	66,453	59,830	6,623	30,623
Russian	6	184,167	101,395	82,772	18,623	15,487
Polish	5	90,824	14,104	76,720	-62,616	20,326
Norwegian	4	60,453	14,530	54,989	-69,519	53,471
Danish	3	86,038	21,239	64,799	-43,560	37,152
Chinese	2	75,987	13,337	62,650	-49,313	9,207
Greek	2	32,284	4,862	27,422	-22,560	26,693
Japanese	2	157,814	26,921	130,893	-103,972	34,740
Correlation		0.97	0.91	0.56	0.80	0.01
P-value		0.008	0.0008	0.636	0.0002	0.209

Norwegian, and Danish have won more prizes than the translation figures would suggest, and that those writing in Japanese have won significantly fewer. A betting person, generously assuming that erudite Swedes might want to correct historical biases, might have had a reason to bet on a Japanese author in 2024 (and would have lost – the odds were good, but Korean was not in the calculations, unfortunately).

I mention these numbers not as major research findings, but merely as a reason for doubts about methodology. I am uneasy about the kinds of claims and calculations that purport to portray an international literary system, especially in its relations with translation, where all the numbers point the same way. I suspect that a problem of common causes might be a more general shortcoming, perhaps of metaphorically cosmological proportions. After all, if everything always draws toward a centralized consecration, should the system not thereby collapse? I need to take a closer look at consecration and translation.

What is Consecration?

The word *consecration* has the sacred in the middle of it, perhaps as a not-so-dead metaphor. The action of consecrating something creates a special place, marked off from the everyday, institutionalized as being for restricted entry. Who can enter that place, in this case the hallowed ground of great world literature? What are the mechanisms by which that ground is marked off, barriers are raised, and the outside aspires to, marvels at, and perhaps fears what lies within? More to the point, why would anyone want to go there?

The mechanisms of consecration play an important role in Pierre Bourdieu's sociology, particularly in relation to literature. In his work on the French publishing system,⁵ Bourdieu revels in the rites with which the most prestigious French publishing house, Gallimard, seals the deal on the authors to be promoted: a committee of trusted men meets and raises a glass ("le verre"), in relative ignorance of how and why literary value has been constructed in the moment of marketing. Consecration, for Bourdieu, is the replacement of a reasoned decision by something like blind trust, enacted in a ritual, beyond external calculations: the rite itself creates the value it celebrates. The symbolic capital thus created – specifically as literary capital – can then be accumulated and exchanged, and the national field of literary publishing can be seen as a struggle to gain and accumulate further literary capital.⁶

In her reportedly groundbreaking work *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova starts from the general assumption that what Bourdieu found in France, especially as expressed in field theory, can provide basic concepts for describing the formation and functioning of international literature.⁷ This might be the sense in which a world system can be seen as a

republic of sorts. This particular republic includes consecration mechanisms able to create the symbolic capital that players in the field then struggle for: “[t]he world of letters is in fact something quite different from the received view of literature as a peaceful domain. Its history is one of incessant struggle and competition over the very nature of literature itself.”⁸ Developed since the sixteenth century, the international literary field would thus be an ongoing competition for increasingly centralized consecration. For Casanova, the mechanisms and rules of the literary field are relatively autonomous of politics and economics; they therefore deserve to be studied in their own right. The main players in the field are nevertheless considered to be *national* literatures, which compete against each other.

Other researchers, notably Gisèle Sapiro, similarly adopt Bourdieu’s field model but allow greater roles for political, economic, and cultural interests. The competitors are not just national literatures, but states, economies, and national ideologies. The instances of consecration would thus have moved historically from, for example, membership of national academies (where they existed) through to avatars of modernist development ideology, where global points of consecration are in the central, most developed countries, from which less developed countries translate in order to catch up. The most recent avatar is then a mode of hegemonic globalization where the languages of a few Western countries operate as pivots or clearing houses through which works reach more peripheral languages: translations can move from periphery to center to periphery, enacting processes of double consecration.⁹ Such is the logic by which the passage through the center creates literary events, a sense of what is happening, which has been a driving force of fame from the beginnings of modernity.¹⁰ The double movements of indirect translations are nevertheless found also to create series of barriers to consecration, which work to privilege production from or near the center. Ronen et al., analyzing general statistics from the *Index Translationum*, find statistical evidence that “if information radiates from the more connected to the less connected languages, it will be easier for an English speaker than for a Nepali speaker to become globally famous”.¹¹

In sum, the various relations between translation and centralized consecration seem less than beneficial for global diversity and have been seen as tending toward cultural hegemony. In the face of such forces, can we really expect resistance from a handful of Swedes who might seek to correct past biases?

Methodological Doubts

The above accounts are well rehearsed and seem generally accepted. Some of them do suffer from common causes to some degree, but the more serious problem, I suggest, is that many of them remain frustratingly vague

about exactly what is being measured and how. Let me get a few minor gripes off my chest before addressing the problem head-on.

Hegemony Because of Size?

Starting from a position paper by Casanova in 2002, many of these studies accept that the international distribution of literary capital is highly unequal and that the distributions of translations are similarly unequal, reinforcing rather than correcting the relations between “dominant” and “dominated” literatures.¹² That position includes not infrequent allusions to the hegemonic role of the English language and the main English-language cultures. Commentators frequently cite the fact that the percentage of translations to non-translations in English has long been below 5 percent – mythically hovering around 3 percent –, while it is regularly above 20 percent in many other languages.¹³ Although this appears to be scandalous and comes packaged with non-calculated claims of systemic injustice, it can also be explained as a normal statistical consequence of the huge numbers of titles published in English (both translations and non-translations, since the variables are confounded). This is simple mathematics. Imagine language A has ten books, language B has 100 books, and 10 percent of all books are translated into the other language. Now, what is the percentage of translations to non-translations in A and B? For a world of many languages, a little algebra is needed.¹⁴ I do not doubt that there is cultural hegemony operating beyond the statistics, but one can scarcely denigrate a language for having many books published in it.

Relative Autonomy of the Literary?

As noted, a more serious debate within these studies is the degree to which literature can be considered independent of political and economic factors. Sapiro sees translations as soft-power weapons by which dominant cultures extend hegemony,¹⁵ such that resistance can only come from increased translations from subaltern languages or countries. There are certainly cases of outright political intervention in the translation field, ranging from the literary in-translation programs of the Soviet Union through to the CIA-associated Franklin Book Programs for the out-translation of mostly American works, with numerous governments providing translation subsidies in between those extremes. Some have certainly sought to use translation as a soft-power weapon. But have they succeeded?

The question has been addressed empirically. Kuppler analyzes 147,443 literary books that were translated into one of the national languages of 32 European countries from 2018 to 2020.¹⁶ He calculates the relative impact of literary, economic, political, and cultural factors on the translation

flows. His general finding is that state support for culture has little correlation with the translation flows, whereas economic capital, “access to prestige,” and “cultural proximity” do. Kuppler’s study thereby “dampens fears that commercialization, globalization, and politicization turn literary exchange into an extension of economic and political power relations”.¹⁷

What I retain from Kuppler are the roles of “access to prestige” and “cultural proximity”. I will return to them below.

A Sociology Without People?

Although some of these studies specifically draw on sociological concepts and even claim to contribute to a “sociology of translation,”¹⁸ the data they draw on rarely include many people. Translation flows are measured in numbers of book titles;¹⁹ awards and honors are counted and attributed to countries; authors are cited and listed as names with more or less implicit literary resonance but with little personal provenance or complexity; the lists of names mostly include no editors, agents, or publishers, and frequently no relations with translators. You must look hard to find people making choices and taking actions. What would they be choosing between? Have all their choices really been made by their fixed positions in the field?

A Sociology that Becomes Literary Criticism?

Perhaps I am being too hard. Casanova certainly draws on Bourdieu’s sociological concepts. Then again, she seems to have no consistent need to test them empirically on controlled data.²⁰ And if I try to ask which variables are being correlated, all I really find are lists of named authors (again, with assumed resonance), along with apparently implicit consecration, and the names of countries. Instead of a sociology of separate variables, the names are firmly embedded in countries by axiomatic attribution. For example:

even the most international authors, such as the Spaniard Juan Benet or the Serb Danilo Kiš, conceive of themselves, if only by way of reaction against it, in terms of the national space from which they have come.²¹

The fundamental claim here may be quite true, but there is no sampling, no textual data, no attempt to locate a social network around those names, no roles for anyone around the author, and no variables such as class, gender, language background, and the rest. All we find is a way of analyzing the internationalization of national literatures that is apparently so exact and so powerful that it can see how all authors “conceive of

themselves,” even if they should say something to the contrary. In short, any attempt at sociology as the study of human variables has been turned into the bumbling insinuation of literary criticism, in this case drawing on nationalized structuralism.

Nations as the Main Actors?

As noted, Casanova mostly assumes that the active characters in her narrative are national literatures. Beckett, for example, “can only be understood in terms of the history of Irish literary space.”²² And if it works for him, despite his achieving consecration in both English and French, then it must work for everyone else as well. Sapiro, we have seen, accords greater agency to political and economic interests, but her main players are still *national* political and economic interests. Like the Olympic Games, the entire apparatus is set up to compare different countries. If there were variables operating with other kinds of categories – again, one might think of class and gender, or perhaps generations, aesthetics, or (dare one say it?) literary quality²³ –, would these methodologies be able to see them? You only find what you go looking for.

A System Described from Within?

Again as noted, instead of controlled sampling, we are offered case studies and examples of consecration. How are these cases and names selected? One suspects they often come from the languages and cultures closest to those of the researchers and their readers, which is the only way the lists of names could be offered as evidence with implicit resonance. The mentions themselves are supposed to trigger recognition of consecration. Or will everyone immediately respond to “the Spaniard Juan Benet or the Serb Danilo Kiš” (in both cases significantly helped by passages through France)? That is, the researchers are at risk of elaborating no more than their own literary culture.

The more one talks about a system of consecration, the more one becomes part of it. Such is the nature of the ideological beast. Casanova herself, in the second edition of her *World Republic*, comments with amused paradox on the consecration of her work, which cannot be separated from the international processes she purports to describe. Again, the variables are difficult to separate because they run in the same direction.

Necessary Antagonism?

If the narratives of literary consecration have proved so convincing, one reason could be that they fit in not only with the nature of literary

prizes – there are winners and therefore losers, after all – but also with author-based ideologies of literature that are similarly based on competition.²⁴ Then again, if the players were *not* really opposed, could these methodologies see it?

Part of the problem goes back to the way the prime categories are drawn from Bourdieu, who defined fields as places of competition and then identified capitals (like literary capital) as values that could be fought for, accumulated, and exchanged. In hindsight, Bourdieu's sociological apparatus had surprisingly little place for *cooperation* between actors (in the sense of productive win-win relationships), and the capitals did not include much like substantial happiness, let alone anything as specific as literary pleasure. To be unfair, Bourdieu's world comprised winners and losers, in a scene that was nasty, brutish, and French.

It is not hard to question that view. The Nobel Prize certainly has winners, but it also functions as a major media event that generates value in and of itself, and that value is disseminated. Both before and after each Prize announcement, there are countless comments, debates, speculations, and critiques, all of which draw public attention not just to the candidates, but more especially to a certain kind of literature operating in an apparently supra-commercial, transcendent sphere. Thanks to the event and the multiple resonances of its simulacra, win-win relations potentially extend to *all* players in the field, all of whom therefore have an interest in keeping the competition going, respecting its basic rules, reproducing its ideologies, and converting transcendent value into aspiration. Since the field, as such, is no more than a human intellectual construct, one cannot easily dismiss those cooperative relationships as mere chimera, manipulated by a more real level of inter-nation competition.

Braun and Unger capture something of those relationships in their description of a “diffuse consecration” that affects far more than isolated authors and nations:²⁵

Representing literary writing as inherently valuable to a wider audience – whether as an author, a journalist, or a prize body – is a deliberate act of positioning that can be seen and reflected upon, but it also invokes something quite intangible that precedes and conditions the very valuing systems that claim to consecrate it. [It invokes] an attitudinal relationship to writing that unfolds both in the writing itself and in the way that writing is perceived by others.

What might such an attitude look like? I take a very well-known example from Salman Rushdie, from the same text where he enigmatically declares “we are all translated men.” Here is one of the consequences of the material displacements that Rushdie counts as translation:

It is perhaps one of the more pleasant freedoms of the literary migrant to be able to choose his parents. My own – selected half-consciously, half not – include Gogol, Cervantes, Kafka, Melville, Machado de Assis; a polyglot family tree against which I measure myself, and to which I would be honoured to belong.²⁶

No, say the theorists of nationalized fields, we will not recognize that freedom. You are kidding yourself: you really belong to English-language literature as shaped from an Indian background, and it is the space of that literature that makes you think you want to select these surrogate parents. Rushdie does not discount that view: the freedom is couched as “perhaps”; the selection is only “half-conscious”; and membership is presented as an unreal conditional (“I would be honoured”). The actual selection, though, is as checkered as the list of Nobel Prize winners, with enough variance to be considered in terms of elective affinities. And the authors are so geographically and historically dispersed that one could scarcely conceive of a game in which they would personally be playing *against* each other. The nature of a family is ideally that all values are shared.

Rushdie’s fictive literary family might represent the kind of cooperative relations engendered by the Nobel Prize in Literature. Of course, what he painfully omits here is the role of *translations* from Russian, Spanish, German, and Portuguese, as if he had unmediated access to his parents, and as if these privileged “translated men” did not need actual translators.

A Problem of Some Gravity

I now return to the main problem. If the Nobel Prize and the major translation flows are both expressions of consecration, both pulling in the same direction inward, why does all literature not collapse into the center? An eventual implosion of the system has been modeled by Méliitz, with considerable historical perspicacity: “Improvements in the technology of diffusion can even lead virtually to the exclusive translation of imaginative works from the dominant language into the rest.”²⁷ We now have precisely those improvements in language automation. So, are translations really forcing all literatures to implode into just one? In terms of the translation network, the problem would be as follows: If aspiration to a transcendent, centralized consecration were the only major force in play, why would literary works continue to be produced in so many languages? Why do people not write directly in the central languages or move their literary idioms toward those preferred by the consecrating centers?

The problem can be visualized. Ronen et al. show the global network of translation flows between 79 languages, mapped from *Index Translationum* data. There is a big star of lines branching out from English,

but there are also secondary attractors associated with Russian, French, Chinese, and Spanish, as should be predicted from the world system of languages described by de Swaan, and then there is a wide periphery of other languages, some clearly connected with the more central languages by indirect translations, others not so clearly, and the Scandinavian languages translate between themselves (as do French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Italian). The main points of attraction could be flowers, but one might also see them as galaxies connected by forces of gravity, sometimes strong (when the language point has considerable mass), often weaker (when the language does not).

Let me run with this second metaphor. It is of particular interest because cosmologists since Newton have had more or less the same problem to solve: if gravity is the only governing force, why do the galaxies not all attract each other and collapse to a center? Various solutions to the problem were proposed in the course of the nineteenth century.²⁸ If the universe were *infinite* in spacetime, then gravity would be at all points and there would be no contraction to the center. But once observers noted an expansion of the universe, that theory could no longer hold: the Big Bang would be the event that pushes outward, against gravity. Then it was found that the expansion is slowing down... I am told that the idea of the universe imploding into a Big Crunch was one of the possible histories calculated by Friedman in 1922. These days, the problem is better addressed by theories of dark matter: we are simply not seeing all the points of attraction, and there may also be points of repulsion. Alternatively, we might still choose to accept that the expansive force of a Big Bang will indeed eventually be slowed down and reversed by gravity – a generalized aspiration to Western fame will eventually collapse into a black hole.

Why no collapse? As with any complex cultural phenomenon, there are many possible reasons, all of them potentially compatible, none of them reducible to just two variables. My purpose here is to play with the cosmological analogy to tease out aspects that are given little weight in the approaches outlined above.

The System is Expanding

As noted, when observations showed that the universe was expanding, the gravity problem was solved by the theory of the Big Bang – something in the center itself exploded and pushed all other points outward.

If you look at the *Index Translationum* over the years (the early lists date from 1932), the one thing that becomes immediately obvious is that the database grows with time. There are more languages and more translations. Part of this can be attributed to the increasing membership of the League of Nations and then the United Nations, to better data-gathering by the

various national institutions, to the massive growth in universal literacy, to the equally massive growth in access to higher education, to the breakdown of barriers between high and low culture, and to the development of cost-cutting technologies for the production and distribution of cultural products – we now have the spread of book publications without any physical books at all. This does not mean there is more literature around; it just posits that there are more works represented in the number and that there are more translations registered between them. There might indeed be something like a Big Bang in the lists that represent a system, but the representations are what consecration rides on.

Translations Enable Diversity of Production

An attractive argument here is that the existence of translations into the more central languages enables writers to continue to produce in the more peripheral languages. That is, if there were no translations and everyone sought central consecration, it would be logical for everyone to write directly in the central languages. Translators, on this argument, protect cultural and linguistic diversity and act as a force that keeps creativity operate in languages away from the center.

This argument certainly has its virtues in some cases, and it fits in with the relatively large numbers of translations into the central languages (again, do not be fooled by the low percentages – they are in relation to high numbers of titles published). I note, however, that the significant correlation I found above between languages and Nobel Prizes was with *out-translations*, not in-translations into the central languages. The effect of translations coming toward the center, although laudable in its theoretical effect on diversity, could not in itself keep the system from collapsing.

Centralized Consecration Can Require Diversity

A more astute application of a kind of Big Bang could look for decentralization in the consecrating instances themselves. In creating and disseminating a transcendent literary value, the Nobel committee needs that value to be in touch with widespread literary aspirations. If the Prize became too attached to a particular language, type of literature, social class, gender, and so on, then its capacity to attract would diminish among all the groups thereby excluded. It is this logic that could predict a few of the more surprising non-European laureates, or more women, or Dylan. If consecration were the same, over and over, it would lose its capacity to attract.²⁹

An associated argument here is that a strong central language can draw on a highly diverse set of speakers to develop literary diversity without translation. English can thus embrace the works of numerous postcolonial

writers to develop the kind of diversity that other languages develop through translation.³⁰ Translation is not the only game in town, and the literature of a central language need not be imposing homogeneous norms.

Cultural Proximity Counts

Anyone who has followed Eurovision voting patterns knows that neighboring countries tend to privilege each other more than can be explained by general consensus. It seems that the same phenomenon appears in literary translations. Janssen found that neighboring countries, especially those with “linguistic kinship,” tend to report disproportionately on each other’s literatures.³¹ Ginsbergh, Weber and Weyers report that linguistic cognateness (as a proxy for cultural distance) correlates with translation flows: “a 10% increase in the linguistic distance between two languages decreases the number of translations by the same percentage.”³² As mentioned, recent research by Kuppler similarly concludes that cultural proximity has a more significant correlation with translation flows than do commercialization, globalization, and politicization.

The effect of proximity is clear in the networks formed by Scandinavian languages and, to a lesser degree, Romance languages in Ronen et al. Beecroft observes exceptions to centralizing forces in the networks around Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese.³³ But there may be much more proximity out there, beyond what we can see.

We Only See Part of What is There

The network mapped by Ronen et al. is impressive but only shows 79 languages. The *Index Translationum* lists about 800; but in 2024 Ethnologue listed some 7,164 modern languages in the world.³⁴ Was there nothing like literature produced in those languages? Were there no translations? More to the point, if there are literary translations in and between the unseen languages, and if they are conditioned by cultural proximity, would the force of those relations not constitute a vast amount of something like dark matter? Could that perhaps explain why the attraction of the center is not the whole story?

What does it mean to make pronouncements on a global literary system of which we only see the parts produced by Western statistics and anecdotes from the more central languages?

There Are Many Alternatives to Translation

In much of the above work, an international system of literary translations is presented as a fixed, static object, devoid of history. If, however, we

look at it from the perspective of an individual translator, commissioner, or publisher, each link usually presents one possibility among several, such that a choice is to be made. The options are not just between one foreign language or another; there is always the choice of non-translation, and increasingly there is the possibility of writing in a foreign language. A writer born in a Catalan-speaking region might hope to be translated into Spanish, which seems to be the major arrow in that part of network, but translations are also quite possible directly into French or English; the writer can also choose to write in Spanish, English, or French; online automated translations can instantaneously make their work available in many further languages (currently 249 on Google Translate, “more than 100” on ChatGPT, and 33 on DeepL), awaiting crowd-sourced post-editing. Once the arrow becomes a choice, entropy enters the system, and with that, so does time, history.

Where is history in the above account? What we find consecrated are no more than lists of names, specifically names of authors, fruit of a Western institutionalization of authorship that in turn gave rise to translatorship. In the mostly oral cultures where transmission is recitative, where narratives constantly build on and adapt previous narratives, there are no single authors, and if fame is to be attached to name, it belongs to the figures that the texts are about: “Sing in me, muse, and through me tell the story of ...” In such a regime, all authors are translators, or all translators are authors, and there is no possibility of consecrating any individual name, except perhaps that of the muse. The kind of translation form where an institutional border is created between author and translator, and where the latter is often subordinated to the former, and where binary oppositions then concern the way one should translate, all that would seem to be a product of the cultural West. One can sense this from the moments when the Western form arrived in other cultures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and required that new names be invented for the kind of textual activity involved.³⁵ If there was any kind of Big Bang at the origin of the galaxies we see, it might be the rather less bang-like evolution and dissemination of the Western translation form. Without it, none of the variables in the consecrations and translation flows would be conceivable.

In other words, much of the world has been excluded.

Where is Consecration?

These analogies suggest there must be more than centralized consecration at work; there are traces of strong counterforces that can move aspirations away from the centers; and there may be very strong local forces that set up literary relations of an entirely different kind.

But then, all along the way in the studies I have cited, we do find indications of secondary attractors at non-central points in the networks. Bourdieu not only idealized a sort of anti-consecration in the small publishers of Provence,³⁶ but also approvingly referred to Casanova's work on Brussels as a "second-chance capital" from where the centralizing role of Paris could be contested, which he notes became a model for the Irish, the Norwegians, for a series of smaller countries.³⁷ These places are not particularly prominent in the quantitative network map, but they were (and sometimes remain) very active. My own work on literary translations in the late nineteenth century located translingual mediation at points in the intercultural spaces between France and Germany – Brussels, Amsterdam, Geneva, for example –, especially in *petites revues*, in an age where translations from German were politically difficult in France.³⁸ Alvstad and Borg similarly document networks for the circulation of children's literature in peripheral and semi-peripheral spaces.³⁹ And Tahir-Gürçağlar (2019) notes the circulation of translations from a wider "Balkans" in Turkish in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as traces of exchanges between Turkish and Slovenian, two peripheral languages.⁴⁰ Rosa finds that the directionality of literary translations into Portuguese shifted from French to Spanish in the mid twentieth century, which would be a move from a more central to a *less* central language – apparently because the two fascist states could benefit from each other's censorship processes.⁴¹ The logics of the global network are by no means uniform and are not always pretty.

It can be instructive to look not at big data and global networks, but at cities, especially the large multilingual cities of our time. Look for where literature is being produced and consumed, and then at where translations operate in those very local ecologies. The city of Melbourne, where I have been documenting literary activity, has about 5 million people, more than 270 languages spoken at home, and significant racialized tensions between cultural groups.⁴² Translated literature is one of the ways in which those groups try to reach understandings with each other. It happens on many levels and in diverse media: in book clubs, library readings, readings of children's literature, audiovisual renditions, book launches, radio programs, presence of writers on television forums, local literary prizes, as well as the annual literature festival and the still-surviving bookshops. In the festival and the bookshops, international consecration is still a significant force, as the star names are displayed prominently to entice customers into the more complex offerings inside. But much of the consecration and minor fame is of a surprisingly local kind, creating networks across cultural groups in the multilingual city. That might be the kind of unseen dark matter that explains why a Big Crunch does not appear to be happening.

Does that kind of consecration rob the literary of its oppositional vitality? Australia's highest-paying literary prize is the Victorian Prize for Literature. In 2019, it was awarded to the Kurdish writer Behrouz Boochani, who had entered Australia without a visa and was a detainee on the Manus Island prison and Port Moresby in Papua New Guinea. Since he had no computer or typewriter, his memoir *No Friend but the Mountains* was sent out as a series of WhatsApp messages in Persian to Omid Tofighian, who translated it into English and added a long narrative introduction.⁴³ The translation became part of domestic protests against Australia's inhuman and illegal immigration policy. The literary prize thus became part of that same protest, from within the consecrating establishment. Just one snag: to be eligible for the prize, candidates had to be Australian citizens, a standing that the Australian government rigorously denied to Boochani (who later gained refugee status in New Zealand). The prize was awarded nonetheless, making the consecration part of the protest, thwarting any official neutralization by the state.

In these particular practices, translation and consecration are no longer used as external legitimation; they become instruments of local disruption, speaking the languages of the land in which the conversation is to be held. Where is the sacred in this process? It might be in dark matter, which conforms the shapes that Australian Aboriginal culture sees in the heavens, where we only see stars and galaxies. Yet it might also be in the languages and language varieties of extreme locality: for Aboriginal culture, languages were planted in the land by roaming spirits, and they are respected as sacred in themselves. Entering a territory, a speaker may change language to show respect for the spirit of that land, to win good graces and have effect.⁴⁴ That is not translation of the Western kind.

Notes

- 1 I take the term from Chatarina Edfeldt et al. *Northern Crossings: Translation, Circulation and the Literary Semi-periphery* (Bloomsbury, 2022).
- 2 Pascale Casanova, "Consécration et accumulation de capital littéraire. La traduction comme échange inégal," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 144 (2002): 7–20.
- 3 In Abram de Swaan's model of the global language system, peripheral languages have few translations and central languages have many, which *motivates* the growing centrality of any of the central languages: "The smaller the peripheral language in question, the more likely it is that translations from the larger language will remain rare and inadequate"; "The advantage of learning a highly central language may reside in the opportunity not only to read its literature but also to read the translations that have been made into it from a multitude of other languages." *Words of the World: The Global Language System* (Polity Press, 2001), 46, 199.

- 4 For example: "The significance of translations within language groups [...] is shown to depend primarily on the position of the language within the international system." Johan Heilbron, "Towards a Sociology of Translation. Book Translations as a Cultural World-System," *European Journal of Social Theory* 2, no. 4 (1999): 432. But then the same author uses translation flows partly to *define* centrality: "A language is more central, when it has a larger share in the total number of translated books worldwide" (p. 433). Pending more careful definitions, this seems to be a case of common cause. There can only be dependency if the variables are initially separate.
- 5 Pierre Bourdieu, "Une révolution conservatrice dans l'édition," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 126–127 (1999): 3–28.
- 6 Pierre Bourdieu, "Le Marché des biens symboliques," *L'Année sociologique* 22 (1971): 49–126; and *Les Règles de l'art* (Seuil, 1992).
- 7 Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Seuil, 1999), cited here from the English translation, *The World Republic of Letters* (Harvard University Press, 2004), xii.
- 8 Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Seuil, 1999), cited here from the English translation, *The World Republic of Letters* (Harvard University Press, 2004), 12.
- 9 Pascale Casanova, "Consécration et accumulation de capital littéraire. La traduction comme échange inégal," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 144 (2002): 7–20 ; Yvonne Lindqvist, "Translation Bibliomigration: The Case of French Caribbean Literature in Sweden." *Meta. International Journal for Translation Studies* 64, no. 3 (2019): 600–630; Yvonne Lindqvist, "Maryse Condé and the Alternative Nobel Prize of 2018." In *Translation Flows: Exploring Networks of People, Processes and Products*, edited by Ilse Feinauer, Amanda Marais, and Marius Swart. (Benjamins, 2023).
- 10 Cf. André Lefevere, *Translation, Rewriting, and the Manipulation of Literary Fame* (Routledge, 1992).
- 11 Shahar Ronen et al. "Links that Speak: The Global Language Network and Its Association with Global Fame." *PNAS* 111, no. 52 (2014): E5618. The "fame" variable is measured by numbers of language versions for an author in Wikipedia and appearances in the *Human Accomplishment* list. It does not measure literary consecration as such. In the case of the Wikipedia mentions, translation is clearly part of both the dependent and independent variables. The findings might be very different if fame were measured non-centrally, by a survey of bookshops in Kathmandu, for instance.
- 12 Pascale Casanova, "Consécration et accumulation de capital littéraire. La traduction comme échange inégal," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 144 (2002): 7–20.
- 13 In translation studies, many of the references refer back to Lawrence Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (Routledge, 1995).
- 14 A basic formula can be found in Anthony Pym and Grzegorz Chrupała, "The Quantitative Analysis of Translation Flows," in *Less Translated Languages*, ed. Albert Branchadell and Lovell Margaret West (Benjamins, 2004); a more

- complete account is in Victor Ginsburgh and Shlomo Weber, *How Many Languages Do We Need?* (Princeton University Press, 2011).
- 15 Cf. Gisèle Sapiro, "Translation as a Weapon in the Struggle against Cultural Hegemony in the Era of Globalization," *Bibliodiversity* 3 (2014): 31–40; and Gisèle Sapiro, "Translation as a Weapon," *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Literature* (2019).
 - 16 Matthias Kuppler, "How Autonomous Is the Transnational Literary Field?" OSF Preprints (10 Oct. 2024).
 - 17 Matthias Kuppler, "How Autonomous Is the Transnational Literary Field?" OSF Preprints (10 Oct. 2024): 1.
 - 18 Cf. Johan Heilbron, "Towards a Sociology of Translation. Book Translations as a Cultural World-System," *European Journal of Social Theory* 2, no. 4 (1999): 432.
 - 19 An associated problem here is the general weakness of the *Index Translationum* as virtually the only database of translations resembling anything like big data. Different countries have different collection methods and, more problematic, different definitions of books (and sometimes of translations), so the only reliable way to work with the data is on the basis of in-country percentages (for example, number of translations as a percentage of number of book titles within the one country). The international comparisons are further skewed by the withdrawal of the United States from UNESCO in 1984. The database was discontinued in 2008, so it does not help us understand the more recent workings of publishing conglomerates, translation automation, and online distribution.
 - 20 This is not to say that the sociology she draws on is entirely clear in its methodology. Bourdieu's work on French publishers, for example, does not explain why or how only 61 of 279 publishers were in the sample, and how the cluster criteria were organized. See the notes to our translation "A Conservative Revolution in French Publishing," (ResearchGate, 2017).
 - 21 Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Seuil, 1999), 41.
 - 22 Pascale Casanova, *La République mondiale des lettres* (Seuil, 1999), 41.
 - 23 Shahar Ronen et al. at least admit the methodological possibility that there are differences in talent: "we note that the data cannot distinguish between the hypothesis that speakers translate material from a hub language into their own language because the content produced in the hub language is more noteworthy or the hypothesis that a person has an advantage in the competition for international prominence if he or she is born in a location associated with a hub language" (Ronen, Shahar et al. "Links that Speak: The Global Language Network and Its Association with Global Fame." *PNAS* 111, no. 52 (2014): E5622).
 - 24 Perhaps the clearest expression of this antagonistic view is Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence* (Oxford University Press, 1973).
 - 25 Rebecca Braun and Johann Wolfgang Unger, "Diffuse Consecration. How Modes of Authorship Shape Literary Prizes," *Poetics* 101 (2023): 3.
 - 26 Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (Penguin, 1991), 20–21.

- 27 Jacques Méritz, "The Impact of English Dominance on Literature and Welfare," *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organization* 64 (2007): 194.
- 28 Perhaps the most entertaining account is in Chapter 3 of Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (Bantam Books, 1990).
- 29 This argument should not be pushed too far. State-controlled consecration can also seek to annul diversity. An early paper by Ponton, drawing on Max Weber but not far from Bourdieu, traces the positions gained and prizes won by the Parnassian poets, as their initially norm-breaking movement was eventually neutralized by the French state. See Rémy Ponton, "Programme esthétique et accumulation du capital symbolique," *Revue française de sociologie* 14 (1973): 202–230.
- 30 I think this argument was first formulated by Jean-Paul Constantin, "Les éditeurs," in *Traduire l'Europe*, ed. Françoise Barret-Ducrocq (Payot, 1992). Some calculations were added in Anthony Pym, "Scandalous Statistics? A Note on the Percentages of Translations into English." *Source. The Newsletter of the Literary Division of the American Translators Association* 29 (1999). The argument was further supported by Victor Ginsburgh et al., "The Economics of Literary Translation: Some Theory and Evidence." *Poetics* 39 (2011): 228–246.
- 31 Susanne Janssen, "Foreign Literatures in National Media," *Arcadia* 44, no. 2 (2009): 352–374.
- 32 Victor Ginsburgh et al. "The Economics of Literary Translation: Some Theory and Evidence." *Poetics* 39 (2011): 237.
- 33 Alexander Beecroft, *An Ecology of World Literature. From Antiquity to the Present Day* (Verso, 2015).
- 34 www.ethnologue.com/ethnologueblog/welcome-27th-edition/
- 35 Cf. Anthony Pym, "Conceptual Tools in Translation History," in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation History*, ed. Christopher Rundle (Routledge, 2022), 89–90.
- 36 Pierre Bourdieu, "Une révolution conservatrice dans l'édition," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 126–127 (1999): 3–28. In Bourdieu's critique of the centralized publishing system in France, translations are scarcely mentioned as entering sacrosanct ground, which seems mainly reserved for autochthonous produce. At the level of large publishers, translations are predominantly of foreign best-sellers, often from English, mostly from American English, and thus relegated to the dirt of commerce. Indeed, if any translations are to be consecrated in Bourdieu's private pantheon, it would be in the decentralized space of the small publishers far from Paris, run by one or two women who are passionate about smaller literatures. Thus, we find in Bourdieu a certain stylization of literature as anti-commerce, an academic and literary consecration of the anti-sacred, the literature of the soil, of the community, of the people, these days especially invested in ideologies of the intellectual who aspires to relay the voices of a Global South.
- 37 Pierre Bourdieu, in Dubois and Bourdieu, "Champ littéraire et rapports de domination," *Textyles* 15 (1999): 12–16.

- 38 Anthony Pym, "Cross-Cultural Networking. Translators in the French-German Network of *petites revues* at the End of the Nineteenth Century," *Meta* 52, no. 4 (2007): 744–762.
- 39 Cecilia Alvstad and Claudine Borg, "The Impact of Awards on the Translation and Circulation of Children's Literature into Semi-peripheral and Peripheral Languages," *Perspectives* 29, no. 6 (2021): 799–813.
- 40 See Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar, "Periodical Codes and Translation," *Translation and Interpreting Studies* 14, no. 2 (2019): 174–197; see also Şehnaz Tahir Gürçağlar and Nike Pokorn, "Translational and Cultural Exchange between two Cultures Pushed to Global Periphery," *Across Languages and Cultures* 14 (2013): 163–166.
- 41 Alexandra Assis Rosa, "Rethinking the Hegemony of English in Twentieth-Century Portugal," *The Translator* 23, no. 4 (2017): 441–455.
- 42 The inspiration for this inquiry comes from work by Mohsen Khafi, "Wellington Readers' Perceptions of Translated Fiction: A Survey-Based Study," in *Translating and Interpreting in Australia and New Zealand: Distance and Diversity*, ed. Judy Wakabayashi and Minako O'Hagan (Routledge, 2021).
- 43 As described and contextualized in Omid Tofighian, *Creating New Languages of Resistance. Translation, Public Philosophy and Border Violence* (Routledge, 2025).
- 44 See David Trigger, "Languages, Linguistic Groups and Status Relations," *Oceania* 57, no. 3 (1987): 217–238; Nicholas Evans, "Warramurrungunji Undone," in *Language Diversity Endangered*, ed. Matthias Brenzinger (De Gruyter Mouton, 2015).