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Who Creates the World Author? Toward a Sociology of World Literature

Gisèle Sapiro

The paradigm of “world literature” has entirely renewed the field of comparative literature in the past two decades, and has also many echoes in languages departments, in translation studies, as well as, more recently, in authorship studies. David Damrosch’s role has been crucial in developing this paradigm, both theoretically and as a research program, in the sense of Imre Lakatos. With the Institute of World Literature (IWL) and its summer school, he also established a space where this paradigm can be discussed, transmitted, expanded, and put in dialogue with other approaches. Among others, he expressed interest in the sociology of translation and, after having included one of my articles in his anthology on *World Literature in Theory*, invited me to lecture, teach, and be a member of the IWL board. A different version of the present paper was presented in a plenary lecture at the IWL in 2016.¹

Connecting translation studies and authorship studies, this article offers a theoretical framework for a sociology of world literature, which can enrich the world literature paradigm, by studying the individuals and institutions who contribute to the circulation of works in translation and to the making of world authorship. Such a sociological perspective also supplements two other major contributions in this domain: Pascale Casanova’s field analysis of *The World Republic of letters* (1999/2005), and Franco Moretti’s “distant reading” “Conjectures on World Literature” (2000).

In his seminal book *What Is World Literature?* (2003), Damrosch first defines world literature as works that circulate *as literature* “beyond their cultural of origin, either in

¹ A former version had been presented at the Mackenzie lecture at Oxford in March 2016, hosted by Peter McDonald.

translation or in their original language" (Damrosch 4). This broad definition was strategic in breaking with the until then prevailing approach to "world literature" (a translation of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*) as a set of canonical "masterpieces" (Damrosch 15), embodied for instance by the *Norton Anthology of World Masterpieces*. As Damrosch points out, this anthology included no woman until 1976 (when it added two pages of Sappho to the third edition), and no non-Western author until 1992 (Damrosch 127–28). Such a restricted andro- and Euro-centric definition was far from reflecting the transcultural circulation of literary works, which has kept expanding following the growth to the book industry, as noted by Moretti, and the rise of national literatures, as analyzed by Casanova. Responding to Damrosch's definition, Emily Apter has raised the question of the obstacles to translation (Apter). Still, many works do circulate. Which ones do and under which conditions? This question interests the sociology of (world) literature, and the sociology of translation for those works that do circulate in other languages: what factors favor or hinder their circulation and who are the intermediaries implicated in this process (Sapiro *How do literary texts*)?

The second aspect underscored by Damrosch is the fact that, when circulating beyond its culture of origins, literature is read differently, in specific ways, which need to be taken into account. This consideration, which connects the world literature paradigm with reception studies, also resonates with polysystem theory, which studies cultural transfers from one polysystem to another (Even-Zohar; Damrosch *What Is World Literature?* 25). It also echoes Pierre Bourdieu's invitation to focus on the field of reception and on the role of "importers" in order to understand how works and ideas circulate internationally (Bourdieu 2023). These importers translate and label the imported works in order to introduce them in the reception field.

In this process, the work is transformed, even more so in translation, but also through these foreign appropriations. This is the third aspect that Damrosch considers: the "elliptical space" created by the circulation, between the culture of origin and the culture of reception (Damrosch *What Is World Literature?* 133). This space is produced by the interpreters of the work, which ascribe new significations to the work and, through it, to its culture of origin. Who are these interpreters? What are their motivations? This third aspect connects with the sociology of reception (Sapiro "The Sociology of Literature," 113–49).

Damrosch distinguishes world literature from global literature (Damrosch *What Is World Literature?* 25), a distinction that fits Bourdieu's description of the publishing field as polarized between restricted production vs. large-scale production. While the second obeys to the logic of profit in the short term, the first privileges aesthetic criteria and the judgment of peers and literary experts, which are able to convert symbolic capital into economic capital in the long term. Like Casanova, Damrosch focuses on the field of restricted production, or the autonomous pole of the literary field (and so do I, all the while taking into account the economic constraints that bear upon this pole).

Even though at this autonomous pole, literary value prevails, it is not the only criteria explaining the conditions for an author to gain recognition in their culture of origin and even less so beyond. Literary value has to be assessed by a network of agents who take part in what I call here the making of (world) authorship.

Derived from Foucault's seminal article "What Is an Author?," authorship studies have focused on the legal aspects underscored by the philosopher (censorship and literary property). For this reason, most of them were nationally based, until the recent emergence of studies on world authorship (Boes et al.).² World authorship can be studied from three different perspectives: the author's strategy; the reception of their work in different countries; and the

² It was the topic of the McKenzie lecture I gave at Oxford in March 2016.

role of the intermediaries and mediators. Some recent studies focused on one author combine these perspectives. Damrosch himself analyzes how different mediators and contexts of reception have shaped different images (universal, Jewish, "minor") of Kafka (Damrosch *What Is World Literature?* 187–205).

The objective of this paper is thus to consider the network of individuals and institutions which contributes to the making of world authorship. Bourdieu asked: who creates the creator? (Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*, 76). I shall ask here: who creates the world author? I'll first make some theoretical propositions to distinguish different categories of actors that take part in the (inter)mediation: intermediaries, translators, and mediators. Then I'll turn to the two stages of production and reception. The focus will be on translation, which has become, after 1850, the main mode of transcultural circulation of literary works, in close relation to the nationalization of culture. And it concerns only human intermediaries and mediators, either individuals and institutions, and not machines and algorithms (which operate a different sort of [inter]mediation, that in my view do not contribute to making world authorship; McGurl).

The making of (world authorship): intermediaries, translators and mediators

As Donald McKenzie puts it, sociology "directs us to consider the human motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission and consumption. It alerts us to the role of institutions, and their own complex structures in affecting the forms of social discourse, past and present." In the McKenzie lecture he gave in 1997, Roger Chartier had revised Foucault's genealogy of literary authorship, placing it in a longer perspective by studying publishing practices, which were beginning to focus on a single author as early as the fourteenth century, besides the miscellany books (Chartier "Foucault's chiasmus"). He also pointed to the fact that the literary property granted to authors was closely

related to the rights of booksellers. Beyond the legal system, a sociology of authorship thus needs to take into account the chain of cultural intermediaries and mediators participating in the construction of authorship and authority, both in the national and transnational or transcultural field. However, for a long time, the history of publishing focused on the national production, neglecting translations,³ which became the object of translation studies but with little attention to their conditions of production, and to the sociology of the network of individuals and institutions involved in the circulation of works (however, some literary scholars have started drawing attention to the material culture of books and the conditions of their circulation in translation; see especially Mani). What happens when we move from the national field to the transnational field? This process is not automatic, and the mechanisms of making authorship are not the same in these two spaces.

Sociologists of art and culture have for a long time underscored the role of cultural intermediaries in the production, dissemination, and valuing of cultural works (Bourdieu, *Field of Cultural Production*; Becker). In his actor-network theory, Bruno Latour distinguishes mediators and intermediaries: he reserves the first term to actors who transform the object, whereas the second refers to those who do not modify it in the intermediation process (Latour). The act of translation, like that of adaptation, can be seen as paradigmatic of such a transformation of the object (here the text): translators are thus, in this sense, typical mediators. However, the network of other intermediaries involved in the transfer of literary texts also has a significant role in shaping the form and meaning of the work being translated.

Differently from Latour, and in line with the way sociologists of art and of culture define it, I use the term *intermediaries* to designate not a passive intermediating role, but the actors specializing in making a work public and contributing to produce its value (intermediation with the readers). These include first of all the publishers, and more and more the literary agents.

³ This has changed; see for instance Chartier, *Éditer et Traduire*.

Howard Becker distinguishes the "core producers" from the "support personnel," which include all categories of intermediaries. I suggest to differentiate the "core intermediaries," namely the editors, by contrast with typesetters and the persons in charge with public relations, marketing, and sales, who act as "support personnel" to the editor. The profession of literary agent has evolved from "support personnel" (agents representing the publishers abroad or for other media) to *core intermediaries* representing the author and shaping their public image and work. When these intermediaries act across cultures, we can speak of *transcultural intermediaries*.

Mediators are taken here in the broader cultural acceptance of those who mediate between cultures (mediators may in some cases include the intermediaries). These include critics (both professional and academic), reading clubs, literary prizes, literary festivals, but also censors. Here again the notion of *transcultural mediators* can be suggested to specify those who act across cultures.

Other notions can be used to describe the direction of the *transfer*. The notions of *import* and *export* are used as an economic metaphor for symbolic exchanges between cultures, indicating the direction. In addition to the original publishers, where rights representatives are in charge of promoting the books abroad and selling translation rights, or to the literary agents when they keep the foreign rights, states are often involved in the export process (Popa; Heilbron and Sapiro). The term *importers* is employed to designate the network of individuals and institutions actively involved in introducing a work in the host culture, and can include intermediaries and mediators altogether (Popa; Sapiro "L'importation"). Starting his reflection on the international circulation of ideas with Marx's observation that "texts circulate without their contexts," which is a source of misunderstanding, Bourdieu (*Impérialismes*) delineated a research program around the strategies of "importers" and on their struggles over the appropriation and labeling of foreign texts in a given reception field. He identified three operations: selection, marking, and interpretation. While the *transcultural intermediaries*

intervene in the selection and marking, the *mediators* take part in the interpretation (but can also participate in the marking).

The international circulation of literary works often involves the translation of the text, which raises interesting questions for the sociology of books, since we have different books and texts referring to one of them as a source. Translation is a paradigmatic example of McKenzie's statement that texts should be regarded as "potential," rather than as a fixed artifact (McKenzie 41). Translators may be intermediaries (when they recommend a text for translation, sometimes acting as literary agents) and/or mediators (when they write a foreword or an afterword, and by the very act of translating, which implies interpreting), but the work of translation cannot be reduced to either function. Despite this crucial mediation, the translators' "invisibility" has been underscored (Venuti) and their recognition of authors (Bassnett) results from struggles over their professional and symbolic recognition.⁴

Translation and translators

The value of the work in translation depends not only on the qualities of the original text but also on the quality of the translation. The publisher has a responsibility in this matter: they choose the translator and edit the translated text. However, in this case, the translator becomes a major player in the circulation and production of an author's value. Some say that it was thanks to the translator Madeleine Neige that the Israeli writer David Shahar achieved such recognition in France in the 1980s. The reputation of a translator brings added value to the book, especially in the case of retranslations. The back cover of Lydia Davis's English retranslation of *Madame Bovary* (Viking Press, 2010), for example, features endorsements evoking her

⁴ On their professional identity, see Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger.

translation of Proust. One of the comments, by writer Rick Moody, crowns her "the best prose stylist in America."

An even more interesting case is that of a translator who had started translating a novel of a quite famous author before she had ended the novel. She made some remarks on the plot and on the characters, which led the author to make small changes (although not substantial), thus acting as an editor (interviews with both author and translator, May 2022).

Translators have been recognized as authors of their translations only recently. However, translations undertaken by a famous writer or poet sometimes count as part of their own body of work. Such is the case for Baudelaire's translations of Edgar Allan Poe, which were included in the poet's complete works in the 1932 Pléiade edition.

Much has been done in translation studies to analyze and compare translation strategies and norms of translation, which vary from one culture to another (Toury). We can add that they also vary from one period to another and from one sector to another: for instance, the norms of faithfulness and adequacy that prevail in upmarket literature and academic works do not apply to lowbrow literary products such as sentimental novels or crime fiction, or to youth literature, where adaptive or domestication strategies are common.

The norm of direct translation (meaning from the original language) also prevails in the upmarket sector, while indirect translation (from a different language than the original one) is much more common in youth fiction and in popular genres (on indirect translation, see Samoyault). In some cases, the lack of linguistic skills in a given language makes it necessary to resort to indirect translation. Nevertheless, there are cases when an author considers the translation of their work as the reference text: it happened with the French translations of Albanian novelist Ismael Kadaré (he was able to verify them).

Thanks to the moral rights, that are an inalienable part of the *droit d'auteur*, contrary to the American copyright law where it can be assigned to the publisher, it is the author who decides which version serves as the reference and they can request control over the translation. In the Gallimard archives, one can find letters by Elsa Morante complaining about the French translation of her novel *L'Isola d'Arturo*: she underscores interpretation errors, misunderstandings, and sloppy mistakes on every page. Morante succeeded in getting the translation redone by a translator of her choice.⁵

Not only does a text often circulate in a different language, but the integrity of the work—another norm of upmarket translation—can be altered by cutting passages, either for economic considerations or for moral or political reasons, through censorship or “bowdlerism.” Émile Zola’s novels *Nana*, *Piping Hot!* (*Pot-Bouille*) and *The Soil* (*la Terre*) were self-censored by his British translator and publisher, but this did not prevent the ban against them). After World War II, translation agreements started including a clause specifying that the text should be translated integrally and no cut should be made without the author’s consent.⁶

From selection to production

Works that circulate in translation have gone through a selection process in which the original publisher, the publisher in the translated language, and sometimes an intermediary agent are involved. We now know more about their criteria thanks to the archives. These criteria can be economic, ideological, moral, religious, juridical, or aesthetic. They are sometimes combined. In 1932, the prestigious French publisher Gallimard had to make decisions about works that might provoke a scandal. Gaston Gallimard decided to publish D. H. Lawrence’s

⁵ Gallimard Archives; see Sapiro, “Role of Publishers.”

⁶ As I found in the archives of publishing at IMEC.

Lady Chatterley's Lover notwithstanding the advice from Maurice-Edgar Coindreau, a translator. Coindreau declined to translate the novel although he judged it to be a "masterpiece," because he was afraid he would immediately lose his teaching position at Princeton University. The novel encountered great success in France and Lawrence would become Gallimard's most translated author. Two years after the publication, Gallimard's committee rejected Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* on the motive that the author didn't "have enough talent to justify the publication here of his pornographic book" (Gallimard Archive, my translation). At the same time, Gallimard engaged in the systematic translation of works by William Faulkner, and continued despite very poor sales (between one thousand and four thousand copies), because he believed in the quality of his work (Sapiro "Faulkner in France"). This investment would be rewarded in the long term, when Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1949.

In both cases, of Lawrence and Faulkner, Gallimard deployed an "author policy" (*politique d'auteur*), meaning he invested in the translation of most of their works, in order to establish the author's name and reputation. Such a policy was not applied in the case of John Dos Passos, whose *Manhattan Transfer* did not sell enough in French, and whose works were not as praised by the publisher as Faulkner's. Because of the centrality of the French literary field in the "World Republic of Letters" (Casanova), Gallimard's investment certainly helped both Lawrence and Faulkner achieve the status of world authors. Both feature in the Norton Anthology mentioned in the introduction (but in 2002 Lawrence was dropped to include a non-Western author: Tanizaki; Damrosch, *What Is World Literature?* 131). After the war, Gallimard also tried to recuperate works by Miller, but it took some time until the author accepted.

With regard to the production process, a sociology of authorship calls for the study of how publishers, and since the interwar period, literary agents, contribute to shape the figure of the author and their reputation. Publishers and editors, and more and more literary agents, often

take part in the production of the text itself through revisions, copyediting, and choosing the title. Sartre's publisher, Gaston Gallimard, proposed *La Nausée* as a title instead of the author's initial idea, *Melancholia*. One can ask what the image of Sartre as an author would have been had he kept his first title. Titles are also an issue in translation; they often change. Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* was first translated into German by Alfred Gold et Alphonse Neumann as *Der Roman eines jungen Mannes* in 1904, and in 1974 as *Die Erziehung der Gefühle* by Heidi Kirmesse.

Titles also frame the reception. In the discussions around the translation of Faulkner's *Sanctuary*, the translator, Jean-Noël Raimbault, proposed the title of "Le viol de Temple Drake" (The rape of Temple Drake), or, alternatively, "Temple violée" (Temple raped), echoing *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, he (strangely) argued.⁷ Such a title would have oriented toward a scandalous reception. This proposition was (luckily) rejected by the publishers who decided to keep the enigmatic English title *Sanctuary* (*Sanctuaire*), which suggested a more literary reception.

The title is part of what Gérard Genette calls the peritext, which includes the presentation on the cover, prefaces, afterwords, whereas the epitext refers to the authors' discourses around the work). These texts, which belong to the "editorial paratext" (by contrast with the "authorial paratext"), participate in the act of "mise en livre" as defined by Chartier (Chartier "Languages"), and what is called in publishing the "packaging" also has an impact on the framing of the reception, while the presentation of the author on the back cover and in other promotional materials shape their image in the public sphere.

Packaging includes not only text but also the visual presentation, which is still very much anchored in cultural traditions. A comparison of the covers of the same English translation of French Black writer Marie Ndiaye's novel *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009),

⁷ Letter to Gaston Gallimard, November 26, 1932, Gallimard Archive.

translated as *Three Strong Women* in 2012 in the UK and the US, reveals differences in taste as well as in editorial strategy. While the British publisher McLehose chose to depict a Black woman, the American Knopf opted for a sober, enigmatic illustration—a dove’s wing torn off—that evokes the destinies of the three protagonists, while discreetly dialoguing with the cover of a book published shortly before by the house and depicting a tree with a bird: *Home* by African American writer Toni Morrison, winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Both editions mention the Goncourt Prize on the cover, a distinction that increases the symbolic value of the work. The American publisher’s back cover announces that she is the first Black woman to win the prize. Thus both publishers *marked* her as a Black female author, a positive property in the context of the present American literary field that may attract attention.



Some mediators also intervene in the production process, particularly the authors of prefaces or afterwords, which are part of the epitext, as said. In France during the interwar period, publishers invited famous writers to pen prefaces in order to introduce the French public to a foreign author in the French literary field. These prefaces performed a transfer of symbolic capital from the French authors to the foreign ones. For instance, Gallimard asked Pierre Drieu La Rochelle and André Malraux to write prefaces for the French translations of Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* (1932) and Faulkner’s *Sanctuary* (1933) respectively, both unknown authors in France at the time. Malraux famously defined *Sanctuary* as “the intrusion of Greek

tragedy in the crime novel," thus presenting this work as both innovative, thanks to the way it mixes apparently incompatible genres, and universal given the way it references classical tradition (Malraux; Sapiro "Faulkner in France"). As this example shows, the paratext also "marks" the text by categorizing it according to genre (in this case crime fiction and tragedy), literary tradition (Greek, in this example), schools, movements, and trends (e.g., Romanticism, realism, surrealism, magical realism). Today, endorsements and blurbs fulfill a similar function (although in a more superficial manner).

However, when the reputation of an author is established, a preface by another author may seem superfluous, or even offending, as Elsa Morante's agent warned Gallimard when the French publisher suggested to add a preface by Simone de Beauvoir. Gallimard's editor proposed this because he heard Beauvoir would write a preface to the American edition. It turned out that this was not a preface but an article for a Book Club bulletin. At Gallimard, the editors did not think the preface would have added "literarily" but one of them thought it would be a promotional argument (Gallimard Archive; Sapiro "Role of Publishers").

Reception, appropriation, interpretation

While the production process contributes to framing the reception of the work and the making of the author's reputation and image, other actors come into play in the reception process: at the pole of small-scale circulation of the literary field (the upmarket segment), the critical reception in the media may condition the book's very existence in the public sphere and is an important step in the production of its value. This is all the truer of the reception of foreign authors, who are also more vulnerable to censorship. Three of Miller's books were prosecuted in France in 1946 for offense to high morality: Gallimard (*Printemps noir*), Denoël (*Tropique du cancer*), and Editions du Chêne (*Tropique du capricorne*). This news led to a vast mobilization of renowned writers in his defense: a "Committee for the Defense of Henry Miller

and Freedom of Expression" was formed, including André Gide, Jean-Paul Sartre, André Breton, Paul Éluard, and Georges Bataille, among others. Faced with such an outcry, the Ministry of Justice let the matter drag on until the amnesty law passed in August 1947 by the new President of the Republic, Vincent Auriol. Thanks to this collective mobilization, the scandal added to Miller's symbolic capital, instead of harming his public image, making him a literary victim of conservative politics (in the line of Flaubert and Baudelaire), while helping him gain visibility.

Critics pronounce classificatory sentences, ranking works on a scale of value that places universality at the top. On the release of the English translation of Ndiaye's *Three Strong Women*, Jason Farago declared on National Public Radio that it was "a major work of world literature."⁸ A common way for critics to enhance an author's symbolic capital is to compare him to famous figures of the past. For instance, the Israeli writer Shahar was branded in *Le Monde des livres* by an influential critic, Jacqueline Piatier, as an "Oriental Proust" (Piatier). Such an operation of substitution does not refer to the identity of the persons but to an equivalence of style (connoted here by the author's name), the analogy being modulated by the exoticizing adjective that transplants Proust to the Orient. The following quote, taken from a review of Marie Ndiaye's *Three Strong Women* in the *New York Times*, also illustrates this process, with the word "worthy of" functioning as an operator of elevation in the symbolic hierarchy:

But as we're sucked into the downward spiral of Rudy's workday and gradually learn more about the sinister sequence of events that drove him from Senegal, we realize that we have entered the head of a paranoiac worthy of Dostoyevsky's Underground Man or one of Thomas Bernhard's embittered monomaniacs. (Eberstadt)

⁸ <https://shop.harvard.com/book/9780307594693>

In American presentations of new authors, one often finds nowadays expressions like "Joyce meets Marquez." With their texts circulating independently from them, foreign authors are often instrumentalized in local struggles and in strategies designed to subvert the power relation structuring the field of reception, as illustrated by Sartre's reviews of Faulkner's novels, which renewed the space of possibilities within the French literary field (Sapiro "How Do Literary Texts").

A positive evaluation by critics can be confirmed by literary prizes, which enhance an author's reputation. The establishment of an international literary prize, the Nobel, in 1901 had a significant impact on the world market for translations. Literary prizes for foreign literature were created later, after World War II (for instance, the Prix du Meilleur livre étranger in 1948), reflecting the internationalization of the literary field and the growing importance of translation. Like the Nobel, albeit to a lesser extent, these prizes enhance the reputation of authors not only in the reception field but also in the winner's field of origin. This impact is even more significant when it is awarded by a prestigious jury in a central country, and when the author comes from a peripheral country.

Nevertheless, the status of translated authors in their own countries can be different than in the country of reception. For example, Paul Auster is much more recognized in France than in the United States. David Shahar, who won the prestigious Médicis Prize for foreign literature, did not enjoy the same consecration in Israel. Reception also differs from one country to another: Jean-Philippe Toussaint is a star in Japan, where some of his books sell up to forty thousand copies, while he is hardly known in the United States, though some of his works have been translated there. This also has to do of course with the publisher in the country of reception: Toussaint is published in the United States by Dalkey Archives, a prestigious not-for-profit publishing house, with a small-scale circulation.

The reception of works also takes place in private or public gatherings, such as reading clubs and public literary events implicating the author in the reception process through public readings and debates about their texts. For a foreign author, a tour is often organized. Beyond the mediating function, festivals have come to play a role in the recognition and legitimation of both debut and more established authors (Sapiro "Literature Festivals"). Indeed, an invitation to an event increases a debut author's chances of further invitations and of attracting the attention of critics, according to the Matthew effect as defined by Robert Merton. As this editor explained, combining tours with festivals proves to be helpful for introducing a foreign author in the United States: "not only have five days of writers appearing in New York, but do satellite events with those writers either before or after the main festival in Seattle and Minneapolis and Buffalo and Washington and Boston" (interview, September 28, 2011). These events have gained a larger impact thanks to social media, live broadcasts, or podcasts on the internet (Murray).

Conclusion

The study of the making of world authorship requires, as I have shown, a sociology of the intermediaries who participate in this process: publishers, translators, critics, writers, censors, and literary agents. These intermediaries intervene in the production and reception process; they contribute to the production of the value of their work and to the making of their reputation. The position they occupy is unequal: some are dominant, meaning they are endowed with a significant amount of symbolic capital and located in central countries and cities, which means that they have a high consecrating power; others are dominated and located in peripheral places. Of course there are dominant authorities located in peripheral countries but they may be less powerful in the transnational literary field than some dominated agents located in central

cities. These uneven power relations underscore the unequal conditions of access to transcultural recognition (Sapiro "The Transnational Literary Field"). Awareness of these external factors helps us better understand why certain works travel rather than others.

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