

TRANSCULTURAL FIELDS IN THEORY AND PRACTICE

The Case of the Literary Field

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In the program Bourdieu outlines for a “sociology of the international circulation of cultural works,” he asks under what conditions it is heuristic to speak of “international fields,” which may only be grasped through the effects they produce, and particularly symbolic power relations (2023, pp. 83-100). He compares the high degree of the internationalization of mathematics with that of law, situating sociology between the two. Moreover, Bourdieu examines the relationship among national and international fields, and the degree and type of autonomy of the former in relation to the latter to distinguish three factors: protectionist policy, the inertia of the educational institution, and linguistic isolationism. Although Bourdieu was unable to pursue this theorization to its conclusion, a number of studies began to reflect on the fields of cultural production on a transnational scale following the publication of Pascale Casanova's

volume (Casanova, 2008 [1999]; Sapiro, Leperlier and Brahimi 2018; Buchholz, 2022; Bourdieu, 2023, pp. 184-188). Nowhere does Bourdieu confine fields to national borders. Nevertheless, the nationalization of fields is a historical fact that must be revisited if we are to understand what is at stake in the formation of a transcultural literary field (Sapiro, 2013, pp. 161-182). I will illustrate this here through the example of the literary field, a study based on my book *Qu'est-ce qu'un auteur mondial ?* (2024).

The Formation of a Transnational Literary Field

According to Bourdieu, the emergence of a field depends on three conditions: the appearance of a group of specialized producers, the presence of consecrating authorities, and the existence of a market for symbolic goods. The formation of literary fields in the different vernacular languages accompanied the construction of national identities and the development of print markets in these languages thanks to a progressive increase in literacy (Anderson, 2006 [1983]; Thiesse, 2019). If the market contributed to the autonomization of literary activity from state-imposed ideological and moral restrictions on the freedom of expression, and offered new professional development avenues for authors, it also created unprecedented constraints by imposing its own law, that of economic profitability (Bourdieu, 1971,

pp. 49-126; Sapiro, 2003, pp. 441-461). Faced with these conditions, authors banded together in circles, cenacles, academies, authors' societies, and magazines, but were also divided in competitive struggles over the legitimate definition of literature.

However, these national fields are not entirely isolated. They are part of a space of international competition orchestrated by nation-states that, in some ways, determine them, as well as transnational networks of exchange led by authors, publishers, literary agents, translators, and academics. It is through such networks that a transcultural literary field structures itself, a field in which a competitive struggle is waged between national literatures, but also among writers from different countries for the accumulation of transnational symbolic capital. As the global book market is subdivided by two types of borders, state and linguistic, which do not always coincide, this competition, which excludes entire regions as well as most regional languages, takes place on the translation market, but also in linguistic areas polarized between centers and peripheries. In both cases, the competition is arbitrated by intermediaries with transcultural legitimizing power,

located in the geographical centers of these markets. The creation of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1901 provided this space with an international consecrating authority. In the second half of the twentieth century, other transnational institutions of this kind were created, marking the transition from an international configuration to a transnational configuration before the move toward globalization began in the 1980s (see below).

These specific intermediaries and authorities led to the autonomization, within the expanding translation market, of a pole of small-scale production in comparison to a pole of large-scale production that has become increasingly global and standardized through the circulation of bestsellers and genre literature (thrillers, romance novels, science fiction).¹ The differentiation among these poles has been codified in the emic vocabulary inspired by industrial classifications through the categories of "upmarket" and "commercial," which are used in the English-speaking publishing field. While at the pole of large-scale production, publishing is perceived as a means to grow economic capital, at the pole of small-scale production, it is the previously accumulated symbolic capital

¹ A similar polarization can be observed in the cinematographic field, between the pole of large-scale production and a pole of small-scale production organized around international film festivals; see Duval (2020). While the notion of a pole of large-scale production is not relevant to

the non-industrial arts, the contemporary art field is nevertheless structured according to a similar dual logic, between a commercial pole dominated by auction houses, and a pole focused on the accumulation of symbolic capital, structured around biennials; see Buchholz (2022).

that is reconverted into long-term financial profits once the titles in the collections become classics. The symbolic capital of a literary publisher depends neither on the size of the publishing house nor on its dividends, but rather on its capacity to produce value. Literary prizes also have the power to convert symbolic capital into economic capital.

In contrast to the pole of large-scale production, which is largely dominated by English-language products circulating in their original language or in translation, the pole of small-scale production is characterized by a high degree of linguistic and cultural diversity. This diversity is due not only to competitive struggles between nation-states, but also to the relatively autonomous strategies enacted by intermediaries and mediators among cultures, as well as by consecrating authorities. Such diversity is partly ensured by the fact that, from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, nation-states have imposed national identity as a principle of literary perception and categorization (French, English, German, Italian literature, etc.), at the cost of an amalgamation of language and nation that was to have a detrimental effect on regional-language productions and those of writers from the colonies. This principle of classification, which co-

exists with literary genre, enables the collective accumulation of literary capital necessary for national literatures to gain access to the translation market. However, intermediaries and mediators have the power to extract themselves from nationally-produced symbolic hierarchies and to distinguish authors who do not possess the status of national writers, such as those in exile or in prison. Tensions between different strategies are exacerbated in extremely politicized conjunctures, such as the Cold War, but can also be present in other configurations.

Thus, the literary field's relatively autonomous pole is not immune to heteronomous strategies, whether they are ideological, economic and/or social. The conditions of access to translation and recognition beyond linguistic and national borders depend on the structure of the transcultural field,² i.e. on the unequal distribution of symbolic capital within this field. The configuration varies according to the political, religious and economic constraints weighing on cultural products and their degree of autonomy. The cultural intermediaries, mediators, and authorities involved in the circulation and consecration of literary works are the vectors of these different logics, both autonomous and

² The notion of a transcultural field has the advantage of not predetermining the configuration of these relationships, even though

this term also presupposes the existence of distinct cultures that can be characterized minimally by a common language and a set of shared representations and ways of doing things.

heteronomous, which clash and negotiate within, or through them.

The possibility of access to “the universal” is, therefore, determined not only by a work’s literary qualities, but also by a series of heteronomous parameters such as the author’s gender identity, ethnicity, geographical origin, and language of expression. This access also depends on the investment of intermediaries and their legitimizing power. The power of publishers and agents varies according to their position in the national publishing field and their country’s position in the transnational field, but also according to their international strategies, which may be aimed at strengthening their position in the national field or investing in another space.

Similarly, it is important to distinguish internationalization strategies at the different poles of the literary field – dominant vs. dominated, autonomous vs. heteronomous – and according to the position of the national field within the transcultural field. For example, the avant-gardes tend to challenge national pathways to the accumulation of symbolic capital (institutionalization, professionalization, division of labor, separation of the arts) and, like the Surrealists, at times join international political movements with which they share this propensity: communism, Trotskyism, anarchism...

Three Configurations of the Transcultural Literary Field

Qu’est-ce qu’un auteur mondial ? combines the questions posed respectively by Foucault and Bourdieu – “What is an author? and “Who creates the creators?” – and shifts the perspective to the transcultural level. The first part of the book proposes a theoretical framework and research program to study both the making of world authorship and the social conditions determining the circulation of texts in translation. The social construction of authorship has given rise to a series of studies since Foucault’s article. From the standpoint of historical sociology, authorship is the result of the professional development of literary activity, the work of intermediaries (agents and publishers) who intervene early on in the process of producing the work and the belief in its value, and finally the involvement of mediators who frame a work’s reception and interpretation. While these aspects are decisive at the national level, recognition beyond linguistic borders does not automatically result from this process. Rather, it is through specific (inter)mediation efforts that the author acquires a worldwide status, in which translators play a crucial role and that involves transcultural intermediaries and mediators.

To understand the mechanisms that favor or hinder the circulation of works

in translation, it is essential to distinguish three types of factors: political, economic and socio-cultural, the latter category encompassing religion, identities, and aesthetic principles specific to the literary field. These factors give rise to circulation patterns that oscillate between isomorphism (the tendency to translate previously translated works) and differentiation (the logic of distinction that governs cultural universes). To analyze these two opposing tendencies, I have combined field theory, which considers the rationale of differentiation, with DiMaggio and Powell's neo-institutionalist approach (1983), and have transposed constraint, imitation and professional norms, the three mechanisms they identify as leading to isomorphism, to the publishing field.

Beyond these patterns, the selection process depends on a combination of parameters linked to the unequal distribution of symbolic capital between languages, cultural intermediaries, and authors. The first set derives from the language in which the original work is composed – a text is more likely to be translated if it is written in a central language rather than a peripheral language – and from the linguistic-literary capital of the national literature in which it is embedded, as defined by Casanova. The second set combines the symbolic capital of the cultural intermediaries (agents, publishers) involved in publishing the work in its original language

and in translation. The third includes the symbolic capital of writers (literary prizes, scholarships), as well as other characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and nationality (women, minorities, migrants, and authors from the Global South had, until the 1990s, fewer opportunities than established Western white men), and their social capital. A fourth parameter is literary genre: the novel has become the dominant genre since the end of the nineteenth century, marginalizing poetry, drama, and short stories on the translation market.

Three socio-historical configurations were identified: inter-nationalization, transnationalization, and globalization. The process of inter-nationalization concomitant to the affirmation of national identities culminates in the inter-war period. Politically recognized through the creation of the League of Nations, this process had concrete repercussions in the literary field and in publishing practices, where national categories became a principle of perception which structured a booming translation market, and triggered an abundant production of anthologies, panoramas, and literary histories.

Among the national literatures emerging at the time, American literature acquired a particular visibility thanks to the active role of transatlantic intermediaries and the interest it elicited in the French literary field. The importation of William Faulkner's work to France reveals, at the

micro level, the chain of cooperation that helped to establish an unknown author from a peripheral region in the country that was then at the center of the “World Republic of Letters” (Casanova, 1999). Moreover, Faulkner’s case highlights the role of intermediaries and mediators in producing the value of this work, and that of Maurice-Edgar Coindreau in particular, the translator who also acted as a scout and intermediary for the publisher, and that of writers such as André Malraux, Valéry Larbaud and Jean-Paul Sartre. Gallimard’s archives also reveal the competitive struggles between publishers and translators, which helped to reinforce the belief in this value. The publisher’s resolute investment, despite weak sales, illustrates the long-term authorial policy that characterizes the publishing field’s pole of small-scale production. This investment was compensated with the Nobel Prize awarded to Faulkner in 1949. At the same time, Faulkner’s French consecration also played a pivotal role in his transnational recognition.

If political and cultural internationalism were reestablished after the war under the aegis of UNESCO in a conjuncture marked by the beginnings of American domination of the new world order, due to the challenges presented by the Cold War, soon followed by those associated with decolonization, this period also witnessed the formation of transnational networks. Such networks existed before

the war, yet literary exchanges tended to free themselves from official relations in a configuration that saw the formation of a transnational publishing field organized around international book fairs. Within this publishing field, certain publishing houses have accumulated a transnational symbolic capital, granting them a superior power of consecration. Such is the case of Gallimard, which reinforced its dominant position in the translation market and diversified its catalog with four collections of foreign literature launched in the 1950s: the prestigious “Du monde entier,” “La Croix du Sud” for Latin American authors, “Connaissance de l’orient” for Asian literature, and “Littératures soviétiques” for writers in the USSR, to which can be added their “Série noire” for crime and mystery books, where English translations predominated. Participating in the reconstruction of Europe as it assured its status as one of the main importers of American and English literature into France, Gallimard therefore simultaneously contributed to the circulation of works by writers from Communist countries beyond the Iron Curtain and to the broadening of the translation market to non-Western cultures.

Still very European-centric, this transnational publishing field was gradually opening up to non-Western cultures thanks to the Third World movement on the one hand, and UNESCO’s policy of promoting “literary interpenetration” on

the other. Initially aimed at creating a new canon of world classics, as UNESCO archives reveal this policy led to the creation of the “Representative Works” program, of which East-West dialogue was a priority. This program was led by Roger Caillois, a multi-positioned figure, situated at the crossroads of several national and transnational networks. These networks gave him the opportunity to implement the program himself with the “La Croix du Sud” collection, while also helping Gallimard to obtain subsidies for the “Connaissance de l’orient” collection, launched by René Étiemble. Once again, this cooperation was not without its frictions, rivalries, and bitter negotiations at all levels, between publishing houses, between managers, and between UNESCO and Gallimard. Nor was it free of ethnocentrism or a sentiment of Western superiority that was still widely prevalent among the literary elite, despite the call for decentralization from Claude Lévi-Strauss and anthropologists at UNESCO. This decentering was nevertheless present in one of the program’s flagship achievements in France, the *Trésor de la poésie universelle* (1959). The result of a project by the poet Jean-Clarence Lambert, it bears witness to the contribution of the transnational network of

literary and artistic avant-gardes in this decentering.

A gradual opening-up to non-Western cultures can be observed at the same time in the Nobel Prize for Literature, a supranational body that organizes and unifies competition among national literatures. Nomination lists from 1960–1972, nomination letters, and Nobel Committee reports consulted in the archives of the Swedish Academy indicate a broadening, however measured, of the geocultural horizon, to Latin America (which saw several of its authors win awards) and Asia (Japan’s Kawabata), before sub-Saharan Africa and the Arab world in the 1980s. Although more women gained transnational recognition during this period, their chances of achieving supreme consecration remained limited until 1990, despite an increase in nominations. In this case, I speak of the *reproduction of intersectional domination* – reproduction as defined by Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron in their studies of educational institutions, which involuntarily reproduces and legitimizes class social relations (1970). The notion of reproduction is more appropriate here than that of refraction,³ in that it reveals the limits of the literary field’s autonomy, or its impure foundations, since such pre-

³ On the principle of refraction, which presupposes autonomy in relation to the social power relations in question, see Bourdieu (1992).

judices are detrimental to the purity of aesthetic judgment.

Feminization, consideration of minorities and migrants, and geocultural decentering characterize the third configuration of “globalization”. The Swedish Academy's choices reflect this evolution, but this diversification masks the increasing dominance of the English language, both in terms of the number of laureates writing in English and the weight that two competing institutions, the Neustadt International Prize and the Booker Prize, seem to have acquired – whether consciously or not – in the selection process. These choices also refract the growing economic constraints on the translation market, and reveal the weight of dominant literary agents and large groups who more frequently collect the symbolic and economic profits of the prize, as shown by the analysis of the publishers of the 33 prizewinners from 1990 to 2022 in the three central languages: English, French and German. Thus, despite its efforts to counter heteronomous rationales and the effects of the concentration of symbolic capital, the Swedish Academy contributes, in this configuration as in the previous one, to reproducing certain modes of domination, in a manner that is here refracted through the field's specific stakes, given that intermediaries recuperate the profits of the specific symbolic capital accumulated by these authors.

These trends – geocultural diversification, feminization, and also the dominance of English – can also be observed on another stage that is expanding rapidly in the era of globalization: that of international literature festivals, which are multiplying following the rise of international book fairs around the world. While the latter bear witness to editorial globalization at a time of consolidation and financialization, the former safeguard a somewhat autonomous literary space, becoming a new consecrating authority that highlights transnational literary careers. Far from offering equal access to this supranational recognition, however, the festival subfield largely reproduces the relations of domination that govern the translation market. Nevertheless, some, such as *Étonnants-Voyageurs* in Saint-Malo, the Berlin International Literature Festival, and World Voices in New York, deploy strategies aimed at countering these mechanisms, regarding both English and Western domination. Such strategies go hand in hand with a politicization that takes various forms, from the promotion of multiculturalism to the defense of human rights and democratic freedoms, turning these festivals into an alternative transnational public sphere where writers, and increasingly women writers, intervene as engaged intellectuals, reviving a tradition once in decline in the Western world.

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