

## World Literature: From the Politics to a Poetics

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On 5 October 2016, Theresa May, the Prime Minister of Britain, delivered a keynote lecture at the Conservative Conference held in Birmingham. Addressing the “many people in positions of power”, she announced, “But if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you’re a citizen of nowhere.”<sup>1</sup> May’s views were subjected to much criticism for its resemblance to Stalin’s derogatory views about the “rootless cosmopolitan” and the Nazi “rootless Jew”, as the poet and scholar Jeremy Adler pointed out, while also suggesting that “May is in effect repudiating Enlightenment values as a whole.”<sup>2</sup> And yet, although May’s speech was clearly politically motivated to address the results of the Brexit referendum, the results themselves were not of May’s calling, and we have yet to see if Britain, or a part of it, celebrates 24 June as an “Independence Day” in the years to come.

What is also worth remembering is that even prior to Brexit, under the 2010 to 2015 Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition, Theresa May, who was then Home Secretary, announced on 23 March 2015 that in order to enforce a counter-extremism strategy, “There will be new incentives and penalties, a sharp reduction in funding for translation services, and a significant increase in the funding available for English language training.”<sup>3</sup> In light of these deeply concerning political assertions for a multicultural Britain, it is now more important than ever to reconsider Erich Auerbach’s critique of “standardization” since the second half of the twentieth century, which foresaw the dangers of the world being reduced to: “a single literary culture, only a few literary languages, and perhaps even a single literary language. And herewith the notion of *Weltliteratur* would be at once realized and destroyed” (Auerbach 3). If literature can be considered a mirror to humanity that has survived as a multiplicity, the role of the writer, translator, and critic calls for an urgent reassessment today. In this paper, I will provide a brief overview of world literature and its political repercussions, as reflected in the thoughts of Goethe, Marx and Engels, and Casanova, and I will address the discipline’s need for reinvention using Samuel Beckett as an example, and Tagore’s views on *vishva-sahitya*.

Literary criticism is over two millennia old, and yet the classics from then, as first established by the Romans, are still read, recited, performed and studied today, along with texts that have resurfaced orally and in writing from around the world. This makes literature one of the oldest extant human ecological systems, wherein we are able to retrace an evolutionary growth through new works, fresh translations, republications, commentaries, and often a plethora of adaptations and appropriations. So, by the time *Weltliteratur* is introduced into critical discourse, it is not merely a German *Aufklärung* or Enlightenment coinage that has been re-instituted and recognised academically by the global powers of a cyclopean Euro-American centre. Instead, it is first and foremost a conceptual framework for perceiving literature that dates back centuries, and which varies in its functions across the planet.

This is clearly shown in the transnational uses of the terminology that has been passed down by eminent individuals over the last two centuries, starting from Schlözer and Goethe, to Gorky, Brandes, Steiner, and more recently Casanova, Moretti, Damrosch, and Apter, amongst numerous other scholars and critics. As a result, with the increasing “inclusion” of the word “world”, literature has gained a critical self-reflection added to its precedent function across countries, cultures, religions, and languages. Classics that have hitherto shaped cultural memory and often a sense of historic identity or writers who have been largely forgotten for decades are no longer taken for granted or swept aside, but they are questioned and recalibrated at the planetary, national, and local scales, to the extent that any stable notion of a world literature is now repeatedly subjected to interrogation. The most obvious of these cases are revealed when comparing teaching syllabi across universities, or when considering world literature anthologies, compilations, and book series, which differ immensely from one another.

When retracing its roots, the standard place to begin a discussion of world literature is Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s letters. Although he was not the first to use the term “*Weltliteratur*”, it is Goethe’s

comments on world literature that ensured its wider circulation.<sup>4</sup> In his often-quoted conversation with Eckermann dated 31 January 1827, Goethe remarks: “National literature is now rather an unmeaning term; the epoch of world literature is at hand, and everyone must strive to hasten its approach” (Goethe in Damrosch, Melas, and Buthelezi 23). Even if broad and idealistic, Goethe’s reflections on world literature in his later letters and articles begin to formulate the early traces of a concept or a mode of perceiving literature. On 12 October 1827, Goethe writes to Boisserée: “world literature develops in the first place when the differences that prevail within one nation are resolved through the understanding and judgment of the rest” (Goethe in D’haen, Domínguez, and Thomsen 11); while in the draft to his Introduction to Thomas Carlyle’s *Life of Schiller* (1825), he suggests: “General world literature can only develop when nations get to know all the relations among all the nations. The inevitable result will be that they will find in each other something likeable and something repulsive, something to be imitated and something to be rejected” (14-15). In other words, Goethe advocates an enriching exchange of literature in order to understand and distinguish the likeable from the repulsive: whether this be from an aesthetic, cultural, or literary point of view, the possibility is left open. The world is thus regarded as a playground for the intermingling of cultural entities, an idea that has found new meaning in Damrosch’s “threefold definition focused on the world, the text, and the reader” (Damrosch 2003, 281).<sup>5</sup> So even during the emerging stages of the term “*Weltliteratur*” there is an insistence on the need for literary works to circulate beyond local and national boundaries and initiate a cross-cultural interaction: a simple, straightforward, and seemingly apolitical proposition, with the objective of national and cultural enrichment.

The notion of world literature crops up again twenty years later in Marx and Engels’ *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), but this time it is linked with the bourgeoisie’s “exploitation of the world market”: “The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature” (Marx and Engels 213). The “world” in this case takes on a different function, for Marx and Engels view it as the result of global industrialisation that generates a form of intellectual cohesion,<sup>6</sup> which adds a perceptive sense of establishment to Goethe’s erstwhile apolitical repository of national and regional literary affinities and differences. Knowledge is regarded as a manifestation of political power that shapes literature and the world, rejecting “old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency.” In *Death of a Discipline* (2003), Gayatri Spivak remarks that to take Marx and Engels’ vision of literature at face value and build a theory of world literature based on it can only be “disingenuous”, since a closer reading reveals that they “were celebrating the in-itself-dubious achievements of the bourgeoisie and the world market” while latently advocating, as Tom Nairn remarks, “a world of nationalism” (Spivak 108). In Marx and Engels’ own words, the bourgeois society that has “conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom (sic) he has called up by his spells” (Marx and Engels 214). In other words, the “world literature” pictured in their political manifesto is not as much a eulogy as a foreboding sense of its potential threat, which is more immediate to Marx and Engels than the communist spectre haunting Europe formed off the proletariat. Thus, the focus is shifted from a Goethean apolitical body of literature to the politicised world with its national boundaries, industrial clusters and marketing networks that will soon shape a globalisation split between the dominant and the dominated.

When taking Marx and Engels’ premonitions into account, any view that conceives of world literature using a predetermined yardstick can lead to its collapse, no matter how inclusive its aesthetic value. Even Goethe, for instance, turns to “the Greeks of antiquity” as a model of literary perfection, and not “Chinese or Serbian literature” or even Calderón and the Nibelungen, perhaps as an immediate counter-statement on realising the enormity of his proposition (Goethe in Damrosch, Melas, and Buthelezi 23).<sup>7</sup> By regarding literature as a development out of the particular, he loses his objective to know ‘*all* the relations among *all* the nations’ (my italics), as with many comparatists that follow. Numerous subsequent studies have treated the aesthetic function of one period, one writer, or even one genre and oeuvre as a normative model for the many literary creations that may have entirely different temporal and cultural values. The results of these studies have often established canons or even “countercanons”, “hypercanons”, and “shadow

canons”<sup>8</sup> that are inevitably biased hierarchical structures, as reflected in the publishing and academic sectors, where those with power make the selections that are sold into classrooms around the world with an added stamp of authority.

This leads to Pascale Casanova’s study of the commercial aspects of literature, as she argues that Goethe’s notions of *Weltliteratur* and “Germany’s entry into the international literary space” arise simultaneously; hence, what Goethe envisages is a “market where all nations offer their goods” with the German translator at its heart (Casanova 2004, 14).<sup>9</sup> In her speculation on world literature, there is no denying of centres and peripheries, as Casanova herself corroborates through her “careful historical analysis” that determines a “Gallocentricism” in the mercantile world of letters, or an “exceptional concentration of literary resources” in Paris within an evolving international space (Casanova 2004, 46-47; xiii). Taking the example of Carlos Fuentes, Casanova scathingly remarks that “the effects of consecration by the central authorities can be so powerful as to give certain writers from the margins who have achieved full recognition the illusion that the structure of domination has simply disappeared”, which keeps those representing multiculturalism from losing their jobs (Casanova 2005, 87). As with Franco Moretti’s “*law of literary evolution*” based on Wallerstein’s world-systems theory, or Gisèle Sapiro’s sociological studies built on Bourdieu’s field theory, much of the twenty-first century advances in world literature have thus invariably examined networks of centre and periphery, where the relatively peripheral literary creations that are incorporated into the shifting economic centres have been measured based on their varying degree of resistance. Hence, in one of her recent articles, Sapiro begins by summarising the increasing thrust in any discourse of world literature today: “If we consider world literature as referring to those literary works that circulate beyond their national borders (Damrosch), then we have to ask how these works circulate, and what obstacles they encounter (Apter)” (Sapiro 81).

Over the past couple of decades, critics such as Casanova, Spivak, and Apter have thus problematized multiculturalism and questioned the worldliness of the “world republic of letters”, suggesting that the possibility of “a peaceful internationalism” in literature is not as straightforward as it would at first appear (Casanova 2004, 43). Apter invokes “untranslatability as a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavors” (Apter 3); Spivak calls for comparative literature’s “patient and provisional and forever deferred arrival into the performative of the other” (Spivak 13); and Casanova argues: “nothing is more international than a national state: it is constructed solely in relation to other states, and often in opposition to them”, with a suggestion that this is also how literature is situated in the world (Casanova 2004, 36). From Casanova’s perspective, the literary revolutions achieved by Kafka, Beckett, and Michaux, amongst others, are “often the product of emerging national spaces” (Casanova 2011, 131).

Beckett’s views on considering a work of art from a nationalistic perspective is one way of understanding Casanova’s theory. In reply to Thomas MacGreevy’s account of the Irish values in Jack B. Yeats’ painting, Beckett writes: “The national aspects of Mr Yeats’ genius have, I think, been overstated, and for motives not always remarkable for their aesthetic purity” (Beckett 1984, 96). Instead, in his “Homage to Jack B. Yeats”, later published in a catalogue of Yeats’ paintings, Beckett proclaims, “The artist who stakes his being is from nowhere, has no kith” (149). At first, this seems to contradict Casanova; however, while seeking for a definition of the word “cosmopolitan”, Moretti indicates that in 1762 the Académie Française defined the word as a person: “‘qui n’adopte point de patrie’, who adopts no country at all. Instead of belonging everywhere, he belongs nowhere; and if [Samuel] Johnson aimed at including the entire planet,<sup>10</sup> the Académie proceeds by contrast to erase all national states” (Moretti 1994, 93). Consequently, Beckett’s idea of an artist as belonging nowhere clearly reflects the Académie’s notion of the cosmopolitan artist during the French Enlightenment, as reconceptualised from the original Greek term *κοσμοπολίτης* (*kosmopolitês*) signifying: *κόσμος* (*kosmos*) world + *πολίτης* (*politês*) citizen. According to Casanova, Paris in the 1900s was thus key to Beckett’s success as a cosmopolitan writer, because “its verdicts were the most autonomous (that is, the least national) in the literary world, it constituted a court of final appeal”, particularly when it came to Beckett’s rejection of the aesthetics established by the Irish writers who preceded him (Casanova 2004, 95). Paris gave Beckett the freedom to write in an English that was not

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English or Anglo-Irish, as reflected in his oeuvre; it provided him a space for self-exile amidst other writers, and a scope for self-translation amidst another language, resulting in originality and his eventual success within a competing literary marketplace.

While Casanova's line of enquiry helps to contextualise Beckett and other writers and artists from the early 1900s to the 1950s, it falls to pieces more generally when she argues that in Beckett's case, the "unavoidable inheritance"<sup>11</sup> occurs through a rejection of "his national heritage, forsaking his homeland for a country that is more richly endowed in literary resources than his own" (Casanova 2004, 41). For, as Christopher Prendergast argues: "it would seem that Beckett took up French not to escape Anglo-Irish but to escape the word-spinning seductions of James Joyce. Beckett's emancipation is not about the emancipation of 'Irish literary space'; it is about the emancipation of Samuel Beckett" (Prendergast 116). In other words, while Paris no doubt served a good number of modern writers to find their own voices, overstating its importance as the prime location for seekers of "aesthetic purity", or identifying it as the "nowhere" of the planet at that specific period of history, defeats the city's cosmopolitan purpose and recreates a biased system built on Parisian values. Moreover, Beckett also wrote a French that was not entirely French, while also not Irish or English, before self-translating his work, which suggests that he rejected not just the English language, but language in general.

As a matter of fact, echoing Casanova's views, the French translator and editor Hans Naumann specifically asked Beckett on 15 February 1954 why he chose to write in French instead of English or in "Irish-language":

Given the impossibility of launching an Irish-language work beyond the borders of that small country, you find yourself forced to choose a foreign language: either French or English; you choose French. [...] Do you think that French culture is a more adequate base for your work? (Beckett 2011, 466)<sup>12</sup>

To this, Beckett replied in a letter dated 17 February 1954, which is worth examining closely in this context, despite Beckett's request not to quote from it at the end:

It was in order to change, to see, nothing more complicated than that, in appearance at least. In any case nothing to do with the reasons you suggest. I do not consider English a foreign language, it is my language. If there is one that is really foreign to me, it is Gaelic. You may put me in the dismal category of those who, if they had to act in full awareness of what they were doing, would never act. Which does not preclude there being urgent reasons, for this change. I myself can half make out several, now that it is too late to go back. But I prefer to let them stay in the half-light. I will all the same give you one clue: the need to be ill equipped ("mal armé"). (464)<sup>13</sup>

Based on this response, the question of Beckett renouncing a "native" language does not even arise, since Beckett never identified with a Gaelic background in the first place, and nor does he express an urge to adopt French because of its rich "literary resources." It is true that Beckett censured Ireland numerous times for its narrow religiosity<sup>14</sup> and the romanticism associated with the Irish Revival,<sup>15</sup> and that he wrote his most widely recognised works when living in Paris. However, he was not exactly "at home with the norms current in the centers of international space" either (Casanova 2004, 110), albeit cynically aware of Paris as "always a place of rival cliques" amongst writers (Beckett 2016, 111). Instead, Beckett's extremely witty end sentence of the paragraph to Naumann reveals how the French translator and Casanova may have misconstrued Beckett's work, his life, and his bilingual expertise entirely. While Beckett could well be making an allusion to the French symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé,<sup>16</sup> which to a French reader may suggest his familiarity with French literature as opposed to being "ill equipped", one is also reminded of the "Addenda" at the end of *Watt*, which, as Beckett's footnote emphasizes: "should be carefully studied", and which ends with the often-cited one-liner: "no symbols where none intended" (Beckett Vol. I. 373; 379). In this case, of course, the letter could be read as Beckett's way of cheekily suggesting: no (French) symbolists

where none intended. So even when phonetically evoking Mallarmé (e.g. translating a proper name within the same language), Beckett is in effect emphasizing his “incurably inattentive” reading of literature, and his obsessive “lookout for an elsewhere”, whether in reading Proust, Joyce, Schopenhauer, Dante, or any other writer and philosopher (Beckett 2011, 465). In objecting to being pigeon-holed within one national context as opposed to another, he simultaneously drives home the notion of untranslatability, considering that “ill equipped” in English or any other language is not “mal armé” in French, and being “mal armé” is not simply being “ill equipped”. So despite evoking a form of “distant reading” à la Moretti in his approach to literature, Beckett also highlights linguistic difference.

More than being “ill equipped”, Beckett even resisted the existentialist movement that engulfed Paris in the immediate post-war period, before spreading to the United States and beyond. In his brief exchange with Simone de Beauvoir during the publication of his short story “The End” in *Les Temps Modernes*, Beckett does not agree with her philosophical interpretation of his work, despite being well aware of the journal’s reputation, which leaves his story nightmarishly mutilated in printing only its first half (Beckett 2011, 40-42). He is thus far from riding the wave of a “Greenwich meridian of literature”, to borrow Casanova’s expression, or even exploiting his power of autonomy as an “exile.” On the contrary, if language can be regarded as armour worn by individuals, communities, and countries, which shapes a primal sense of identity, the literal clue that Beckett leaves us with, reveals his need to be linguistically vulnerable (“mal armé”). Or as he writes to Axel Kaun in 1937: “Da wir sie [die Sprache] so mit einem Male nicht ausschalten können, wollen wir wenigstens nichts versäumen, was zu ihrem Verruf beitragen mag. (As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute)” (Beckett 1984, 52; 172). What is left of his ambivalent connection with Dublin, Paris, and London<sup>17</sup> is probably best transmitted through Mrs Rooney’s words in the radio play *All That Fall* (1956): “It is suicide to be abroad. But what is it to be at home, Mr Tyler, what is it to be at home? A lingering dissolution” (Beckett 2006, 175).

Mapping literary oeuvres as commodity sold and exported by the multinational publishing industries from the literary capitals of the world (e.g. Paris, London, and New York) and thus determining their aesthetic value can be a worthwhile sociological experiment if one has the necessary means and access to publication records. However, the results can also be misleading when misinterpreted, the obvious reason being that popular works, since the time of the Ancient Greek and Roman comedies to the Victorian penny-dreadfuls and the modern Amazon bestsellers, have not necessarily gained a high literary merit and longevity, and nor is every Nobel Laureate or Booker-Prize winner equally cherished across the world over the years. Likewise, while the academic sectors have no doubt played a huge role in establishing aesthetic value, national and international literary canons have varied, clashed, and evolved across institutions, subjected to diverse forces of institutionalisation from within and without. By “distant reading”<sup>18</sup> literary trends within these and other world-systems, the literary critic is inevitably faced with big data that is still nowhere close to being “a condition of knowledge”; it is much too large for an individual, let alone a group of individuals to handle in an effort to circumvent binary models. Resorting to highly advanced computerised graphs and hypothetical patterns may eventually hint at how literature operates in the globalised world. However, for the time being, there are simply too many factors even in one oeuvre to take fully into consideration, as any comparatist or literary critic engaged in close reading would stress firmly. And here again, it is worth returning to Beckett, not so much to contradict Casanova’s views and valuable contribution to world literature that has redefined the field and opened it to a multidisciplinary discourse, but to add a new perspective in light of today’s world.

Samuel Beckett was not solely a writer of books; he was (and often more prominently) a self-exilic writer and director of drama, film scripts, radio plays, monologues, short stories, poems, and, as Efraín Kristal reminds readers in “‘Considering Coldly...’: A Response to Franco Moretti” (2002), he was also a translator. Besides self-translating many of his own works, Beckett also translated information reports for the Resistance cell called “Gloria SMH” in Paris during the war, before working alongside Octavio Paz in translating Latin American poetry into English for UNESCO shortly after the organisation was formed, which was then published as *An Anthology of Mexican Poetry* (1958). It would seem at first that these two

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undertakings situate Beckett pretty much at the core of the politics of translation and the ensuing discussion of comparative / world literature studies with its repercussions on present-day anthologies and higher education courses. For, when discussing the discipline's history, Gayatri Spivak notes: "Comparative Literature was a result of European intellectuals fleeing 'totalitarian' regimes" (3). Beckett, in contrast, takes a highly perilous role in working against the Nazis in the heart of Paris, with his close friend Alfred Péron, who was later arrested by the Gestapo and deported to the concentration camp at Mauthausen and died within two days of his release in Switzerland (Beckett 2011, 16-17). As James Knowlson points out:

As an intellectual who had translated numerous articles, prose texts and poems in the 1930s from French into English [...], he was well suited to this task. Not only did he have the necessary translation skills, but, as Péron clearly recognised when he recruited him, he also had astonishing powers of concentration, meticulous attention to detail and the ability to organise, reduce and sift very diffuse material so as to make it succinct and intelligible for the British SOE (Special Operations Executive) and SIS (Secret Intelligence Service). As noted in the SOE files, Beckett could also be very silent and secretive when he wanted to be, another great advantage for a Resistance agent. (308)

Beckett was thus more acutely aware than any other writer of the direct involvement of language in warfare and its potential for and against violence, and all the more so with his having to flee Paris, and only narrowly escaping the Gestapo who nonetheless arrested several of his co-workers (315). The secrecy and anonymity associated with his task in translating classified information about the Nazi and in supplying this information to the Allies across warzone borders, would have no doubt impressed on Beckett the importance of being a silent mediator.<sup>19</sup> It was not just Beckett's life that was at risk, but the lives of eighty members of "Gloria SMH", and depending on the contents of his translations, probably many others as well.

Following the war, after being "reduced to applying for employment to UNESCO", Beckett was asked to translate a selection of Mexican poems for an anthology (Beckett 2011, 72). This places him partly in the position that Spivak describes: a European intellectual, first opposing then having to flee Hitler's regime, who is harnessed into the "world-making"<sup>20</sup> impetus of a global organization formed of thirty-seven representative countries in 1945. However, being not entirely happy with Octavio Paz's omissions and additions to the selection of poems he had already translated a third of the way, Beckett dismissed his work as "a purely alimentary chore" (Beckett 2014, 153-54). He confessed to Georges Duthuit about "going green" over the poems (Beckett 2011, 181), and of their being "execrable for the most part" (Weinberger 211). Apart from giving the translated poems an antiquated feel by using obsolete English words to reflect their classicism, Beckett also composes "a vivid music for each poem by avoiding the end-rhymes of the Spanish (while still suggesting the original prosody through complex internal rhymes) and by breaking the lines where the English, not the original, demands it" (209). Hence, through skilful mistranslation,<sup>21</sup> Beckett recasts words and at times entire sentences into an English mould; all this, based on his knowledge of Latin, proficiency in English, and assistance from a Spanish-speaking acquaintance who quit when Paz introduced the changes (207). Nevertheless, the anthology "remains the best introduction in English to Classical Mexican poetry", as Eliot Weinberger, Paz's English translator, suggests (Weinberger 211). Grove Press has not only republished *An Anthology of Mexican Poetry* (1985) but has also reprinted the book several times — not as a book of English verse entitled *Samuel Beckett's Mexican Poetry*, or better still *Beckett's Burrito: A La Paz*, which would be understandable in order to maximize sales, given the translator's and the compiler's international reputation — but as a book of "Mexican poetry" with Paz's and Beckett's names on the cover. So, is Beckett unwittingly a *traduttore traditore*, as the old Italian adage goes, or a *trovatore traduttore*, a troubadour translator, or both?

When asserting the impossibility of translating a homonym or a homophone, Jacques Derrida mentions:

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It is necessary either to resign oneself to losing the effect, the economy, the strategy (and this loss can be enormous) or to add a gloss, of the translator's note sort (sic), which always, even in the best of cases, the case of the greatest relevance, confesses the impotence or failure of the translation. (181)

Derrida's choice of words is striking in the context of Beckett's post-Joycean works, for the latter writes to Israel Shenker on 5 May 1956: "The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past" (Graver and Federman 162). Bringing the two sentences together, one wonders whether Beckett's self-proclamation as a writer of impotence is in fact a result of his role as a translator and self-translator. If "Ever tried. Ever Failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" may be regarded as Beckett's literary motif since the post-war period (Beckett Vol. II., 471), perhaps this is the outcome of Beckett's work as a translator from an early age, which later endows him with an international readership. For this is the very linguistic (dis)ability, being "mal armé", that renders him the perfect cosmopolitan writer and translator, "from nowhere" yet belonging everywhere, especially since: "Ours is an age of translation and also an era of retranslation, as translations are revised or replaced outright in order to bring works into conformity with new standards of translation and new interpretations of the works themselves" (Damrosch 2003, 187). Similar to the way in which Mexican poetry has found its niche in the English-speaking world, Beckett too has established a presence in foreign territories through all the inevitable paradigm shifts: translations, interpretations, and adaptations. But at the impossible roots of the Beckettian "gamut", which lies behind the veil of all language with echoes of the Schopenhauerian "*Schleier der Maya*", there is an oscillating presence:

Resting neither in English nor in French, but passing to and fro between them, abiding in neither, inhabiting what in the short prose text "neither" (1979) — another of those works that remained untranslated by Beckett — is termed the "unheeded neither" (Beckett 1995, 258), this self-translating writer inhabits, if anything, a collapsing *indessen* or *inzwischen*, in between times and places, in between the difference between time and place, between languages, between original and translation, between letter and spirit, literal and figurative. (Weller 78)

It is futile to place Beckett within the frameworks of a discipline that is defined by centre and periphery, which maps literature temporally, geographically, or even linguistically. And here arises the need for a model of literature that goes beyond the surface evidence of publication and reception, in considering the deeper implications of a literary text's presence, sustainability, and that non-coercive perpetuation in the world which Beckett's works appear to have achieved.

At this juncture, it is worth turning to Rabindranath Tagore's views on world literature, keeping in mind that he is in fact using 'বিশ্বসাহিত্য' (*vishva-sahitya*: world-literature) as an alternative term for "Comparative Literature", as he interprets it in Bengali. Tagore uses a central metaphor that regards literature as a temple conceived by a universal being and constructed by individual writers from various countries and different ages.<sup>22</sup> At the end of his essay, Tagore makes it clear however that he does not regard himself as a guide to world literature (and nor is he the universal being), and that it is for each one to find their own path. Instead, he proposes:

আমি কেবল এইটুকু বলিতে চাহিয়াছিলাম যে, পৃথিবী যেমন আমার খেত এবং তোমার খেত এবং তাঁহার খেত নহে, পৃথিবীকে তেমন করিয়া জানা অত্যন্ত গ্রাম্যভাবে জানা, তেমনি সাহিত্য আমার রচনা, তোমার রচনা এবং তাঁহার রচনা নহে। (Tagore)

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All I wish to say is that just as the world is not my plot of land as distinct from yours and that other person's, which is an extremely parochial view, literature likewise is not my work as distinct from yours and that other person's work. (my translation)

For Tagore, *visva-sahitya* is thus a priori to a sum of all distinct and divided literary oeuvres, even though nobody knows its complete blueprint, but where any faulty composition is repeatedly demolished.<sup>23</sup> The question of the individual writer's centrality in the socio-political world governed by economy is thus not of Tagore's concern, nor is the struggle to compile a canon of world literature made up of the elites. In fact, he is even critical of contextualising or historicising literature, under the reign of Akbar, for instance, or as part of Gujarati history or the Elizabethan era.<sup>24</sup> Instead, as he proclaims in conclusion:

বিশ্বসাহিত্যের মধ্যে বিশ্বমানবকে দেখিবার লক্ষ্য আমরা স্থির করিব, প্রত্যেক লেখকের রচনার মধ্যে একটি সমগ্রতাকে গ্রহণ করিব এবং সেই সমগ্রতার মধ্যে সমস্ত মানুষের প্রকাশচেষ্টার সম্বন্ধ দেখিব, এই সংকল্প স্থির করিবার সময় উপস্থিত হইয়াছে। (Tagore)

Within world literature we shall aim to perceive the universal being: in every writer's work we shall find a complete unity and in that unity we shall perceive the relation between all human effort at expressing themselves; the time has come for this awareness. (my translation)

Tagore's vision of world literature thus effaces parochial concerns of the writer's individual place in the world, and instead he proposes an aesthetic perspective that partakes in the creative experience of the universal being, in the unity that presupposes relativity.<sup>25</sup> Rather than following a *jnana-marga* (the way of knowledge) or a *karma-marga* (the way of duty), it follows an *ananda-marga* (the way of happiness), which is what Tagore elaborates systematically in the first half of his essay. So, according to Tagore, literature aims not so much to know (বুদ্ধির যোগ, yoga of the mind) or to conquer (প্রয়োজনের যোগ, yoga of need), but to rejoice in the universal truth (আনন্দের যোগ, yoga of *ananda*). There is thus a marked difference between his outlook — where the interrelation between all human expression is not reflected as world literature but becomes a reflection of world literature — and Goethe's and all the corresponding world literature critics', which begin with the particular, i.e. the classical periods or Paris, and from there establish a perspective of world literature by overcoming language barriers and the spatial battlegrounds between centre and periphery that is often inscribed in the literary style of the oeuvre and the act of writing. For Tagore *visva-sahitya*, or world-literature, is not the sum total of individual literary oeuvres, let alone the *crème de la crème*, but a pre-existing condition, which all literature must necessarily move towards without exception. In this context, being "mal armé" is not so much an artist's condition of weakness or ignorance, but a rejection of language and its "puny exploits", an effacement of the self in the no man's land, a move towards a form of world literature not concerned with distinctions between individual writers, nationalities, or centres and peripheries, yet profoundly mindful of untranslatability

<sup>1</sup> For the speech in full, see: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/10/05/theresa-mays-conference-speech-in-full/> (accessed on 28 May 2017).

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/oct/09/theresa-may-rejection-of-enlightenment-values> (accessed on 28 May 2017).

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/a-stronger-britain-built-on-our-values> (accessed on 27 May 2017). What is also worth noting is that the extracts from this particular speech on "A Stronger Britain, Built On Our Values" is nonetheless made available in Urdu translation on the Government Website: "حکمت نئی کی برطانیہ لئے کے پسندی اتہا: "ے تیار عملی", and not in any other languages.

<sup>4</sup> As Galin Tihanov notes, August Schölzer used the term almost half a century before Goethe (see Tihanov 142), while Christoph Martin Wieland uses it in his notes on Horace's letters several years before him (see Tihanov 143 and Pizer 1), and August Wilhelm Schlegel refers to it in 1804 (see Mommsen 25, quoted by Venkat Mani in D'haen, Damrosch, Kadir 285).



<sup>5</sup> According to Damrosch, world literature is 1) an elliptical refraction of national literatures, 2) which gains in translation, 3) and which is also a detached mode of reading (Damrosch 2003, 281).

<sup>6</sup> Or, as Pheng Cheah writes, “the autonomy of the literary as a symptom of autonomization under global capital” (Cheah 34).

<sup>7</sup> Goethe suggests in the same sentence: “we ought always to return to the Greeks of antiquity in whose works beautiful man is represented. The rest we contemplate historically and assimilate from it the best as far as we can.”

<sup>8</sup> See Damrosch 2006, 45.

<sup>9</sup> A little less than a century later, when discussing world literature, the Scandinavian scholar Georg Brandes would reiterate that “in no other language do translations play so great a role as in German” (Brandes in Damrosch, Melas, and Buthelezi 63).

<sup>10</sup> In the sixth edition of *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) published in 1785, Samuel Johnson defines “cosmopolitan / cosmopolite” as “A citizen of the world; one who is at home in every place” (Johnson 490).

<sup>11</sup> Or the inevitable accident of obtaining what Beckett calls “the local substance.”

<sup>12</sup> Naumann’s original letter in French reads: “Dans l’impossibilité de lancer une oeuvre littéraire écrite en langue irlandaise au-delà les frontières du petit pays vous vous trouvez, certes, dans la nécessité de choisir une langue étrangère, ou le français ou l’anglais; vous choisissez le français. [...] Est-ce que vous croyez que la culture française est un fonds plus adéquat pour l’oeuvre?” (Beckett 2011, 466).

<sup>13</sup> “Cela été pour changer, pour voir, pas plus compliqué que cela, apparemment au moins. Rien à voir en tous cas avec les raisons que vous suggérez. Je ne considère pas l’anglais comme une langue étrangère, c’est bien ma langue. S’il en est une qui m’est parfaitement étrangère, c’est le gaélique. Vous pouvez me ranger dans la triste catégorie de ceux qui, s’ils devaient agir à bon escient, n’agiraient jamais. Ce qui n’empêche pas qu’il puisse y avoir, à ce changement, des raisons urgentes. Moi-même j’en entrevois plusieurs, maintenant qu’il est trop tard pour revenir en arrière. Mais j’aime mieux les laisser dans l’ombre. Je vous donnerai quand même une piste: le besoin d’être mal armé” (Beckett 2011, 462).

<sup>14</sup> See, for instance, Beckett’s interview with Tom Driver, where he says: “When you pass a church on an Irish bus, all the hands flurry in the sign of the cross. One day the dogs of Ireland will do that too and perhaps also the pigs” (Uhlmann, Houppermans, and Clément 71)

<sup>15</sup> See, for instance, Beckett’s essay “Recent Irish Poetry” (Beckett 1984, 70-76), which Casanova also quotes when discussing “The Antinational Mood” in a chapter entitled “The Small Literatures” (Casanova 2004, 187-88).

<sup>16</sup> As Dan Gunn notes in the “Introduction to Volume II” of Beckett’s letters, Stéphane Mallarmé, one of Beckett’s “old chestnuts” (Knowlson 653), was also one of the poets to make “impotence so central to his oeuvre” (Beckett 2011, lxxxix).

<sup>17</sup> A “tripolar configuration” in Casanova’s historical-biographical reading (Casanova 2004, 319).

<sup>18</sup> As Moretti explains: “where distance, let me repeat it, *is a condition of knowledge*: it allows you to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes — or genres and systems” (Moretti 2000, 57). Within the corpus of criticism that Moretti has faced since his bold proclamation, Harish Trivedi writes that here is “another manifestation of fast-food MacDonaldization” (Trivedi 22).

<sup>19</sup> To translate means: “to bear, convey, or remove from one person, place or condition to another” (*OED*).

<sup>20</sup> Pheng Cheah uses the term “world-making” in the context of world literature, when discussing the concept’s persevering cogency to imagine an ideal world, “a force that is immanent to the existing world” (Cheah 26).

<sup>21</sup> “Of course it is imperfect, like all translations. But it is the best I can do”: this was Beckett’s response to Edith Greenburg, Associate Editor of Indiana University Press, when she asked him to revise his translations six years later in 1956.

<sup>22</sup> “বিশ্বমানব রাজমিস্ত্রি হইয়া এই মন্দিরটি গড়িয়া তুলিতেছেন; লেখকেরা নানা দেশ ও নানা কাল হইতে আসিয়া তাহার মজুরের কাজ করিতেছে।” (Tagore).

<sup>23</sup> “সমস্ত ইমারতের প্ল্যানটা কী তাহা আমাদের কারো সামনে নাই বটে, কিন্তু যেটুকু ভুল হয় সেটুকু বার বার ভাঙা পড়ে” (Tagore).

<sup>24</sup> On a similar note, Octavio Paz argues that political power and the creation of art do not necessarily go hand in hand, and hence, “it would be a mistake to regard Gothic or Romanesque art as creations of the papacy, or the sculpture of Mathura as the expression of the empire founded by Kanishka” (Paz in Damrosch, Melas, and Buthelezi 152). Ironically, this is the way literature is often taught across school and university curricula, determining a timeline based on “major” trends and ideological patterns of a specific country or continent, or even the ruling body, and worse, imposing these on a foreign literature.

<sup>25</sup> Amiya Dev interprets this as ‘world-worthiness’ (see Dev 470).

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