Shifting Meridians: US Authorship in World Literary Space

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Where does US literature situate itself in world literary space? How do writers in the US relate to literary institutions at home and in the world? In her study of transnational literary institutions, The World Republic of Letters (1999), Pascale Casanova conceives of world literary space as a hierarchical structure, or a landscape shaped by centers and peripheries, and she illustrates her thesis with an intriguing geographical metaphor: Just as the prime meridian that runs through Greenwich, England, functions as an internationally recognized standard for measuring global time, there is also a “Greenwich meridian of literature” that marks the site of greatest authority on a world literary map, a cultural topography that differs from economic or political landscapes (87). Casanova’s claim that until recently, this literary meridian ran through Paris has been regarded as Francophile “triumphalism” (Damrosch 27). But if we consider the relevant socio-institutional networks, her argument seems reasonable enough: between the 1700s and the 1960s, the writers and tastemakers connected with the Parisian literary establishment had the greatest weight, not within the world at large, but within specific transnational conversations about what might count as “modern” in literature and which “regions” within world literary space are most representative of literary modernity (“The Literary Greenwich Meridian” 7–8).1

Casanova’s account of the waning of Parisian authority since the 1960s, however, adds a redundant declension narrative that obscures some of her more valuable insights. She interprets the increasing irrelevance of Paris as a global breakdown of “autonomy,” which

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she sees evidenced by a formulaic international midcult of “tested aesthetic formulas” designed “to appeal to the widest possible readership” (World 171). This verdict accords with current anxieties about a global diminishment of the literary, but it prevents Casanova from recognizing more recent transformations of the literary field, such as those outlined in Mark McGurl’s study on The Program Era (2009) that have arguably broadened and diversified rather than simply eroded the space of market-sheltered literary production.

Rereading Casanova with McGurl enables us to see that the Greenwich meridian of literature has indeed shifted, not, however, toward commercial markets, but new sites of consecration and patronage that are increasingly defined by academic-based economies of prestige (English). While until the early twentieth century, literary value was largely defined within the high-cultural networks of a public sphere (connecting academies, museums, art and music associations, and learned societies with various literary establishments), in the postwar period, the institutional centers of gravity moved toward the university. A crucial aspect of this shift concerns the conditions of authorship: the growth of third-level education produced new systems of literary patronage that provide noncommercial writers with university-embedded social-professional networks which connect creative writing programs and English departments with editors and publishers in a transatlantic print market (McGurl 24). Another important aspect of this transformation is a significant change in readerships: the “humanities revolution” (Menand 64) that followed the massive expansion of higher education between 1950 and 1975 produced larger college-educated audiences, extending the market of serious fiction by what Loren Glass has called a “quality paperback generation” (28), one that is more willing to invest time and labor in specialized, experimental, or “difficult” kinds of writing. The Greenwich meridian of literature thus really underwent a dual shift: institutionally, from a broader public sphere to a “culture of the school,” in John Guillory’s formulation (38); and, geographically, away from traditional centers of the global print market (Paris and London) toward an academic network of credentialed authors, theorists, and critics whose most prestigious nodes are situated in the US.

In what follows, I will explore how the study of literary institutions can help us to understand the shifting value hierarchies in the recent literary landscapes of the US and the world. First, I will read Edith Wharton’s 1923 novella “False Dawn: The Forties” to discuss the relevance of material networks in transnational space. I will then look at how the cultural-expression models of literature we owe to the “Herder effect” (Casanova World 77) relate to the value hierarchies of the global and local literary fields: Baudelaire’s reading of Edgar Allan Poe and the post-1960s rise of “high-cultural pluralism.”
(McGurl 56) in the US will serve as examples here. In a third section, I will refer to the Jonathan Franzen–Oprah Winfrey controversy to argue that distinguishing between sacred and quotidian literary economies (spheres of strong and weak values) helps us to resolve some of the classic paradoxes of cultural authority (the feeling that literary meridians are either undemocratic or rendered obsolete by a commercialized literary marketplace). Finally, I will trace the shifting meridians of world literary space with a comparative reading of Henry James’s *The Ambassadors* (1903) and Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* (2011).

1. The Materiality of Greenwich

The concept of a Greenwich meridian of literature only makes sense if we relate world literary space to concrete materialized networks of trade routes that connect major book markets and literary establishments. These trade routes not only put literary artifacts into circulation but also the value categories that enable readers to sort these artifacts into higher or lower kinds. Lucien Karpik’s concept of “judgment devices” seems helpful here: it refers to rankings, brandings, and other implicit and explicit ways of communicating to its readers where a work, a genre, or cultural form stands between the poles of inalienable “singularity” and cheap commodity. Thus, to suggest that between the 1700s and the 1960s, the Greenwich literary meridian ran through Paris is to call to mind that the judgment devices produced in the Parisian scene enjoyed an unusual amount of trust, not within the world at large, but within the most prestigious material and socio-institutional networks that stretch across the Atlantic world. In these networks, Parisian definitions of literary modernity used to strike other participants as the voice of a cultural avant-garde, a literary cutting edge that reached the more peripheral regions with a certain temporal lag. Of course, the authority of avant-gardes is difficult to measure, depending as it does on the recognition by local and global collectives who themselves differ in their local and global authority. It takes an ethnographic view to trace these perceived hierarchies, and Casanova is surely right in pointing out that the dominated regions tend to produce more perceptive ethnographers, for the pull of cultural authority is felt more intensively from below (*World* 43).

Wharton’s novella “False Dawn” is an instructive case study of the disconnection between transatlantic time zones in nineteenth-century art. During the 1840s, the young New Yorker Lewis Raycie is sent to Europe on a Grand Tour by his affluent father, who instructs him to return with a selection of Italian Old Masters for a private art
gallery in the family’s name. The young man is expected to use his father’s contacts in the London art market to purchase canonical sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings that conform to the reigning standards of greatness as defined, one generation earlier, by Sir Joshua Reynolds. But in Europe, Raycie is drawn toward the emerging Pre-Raphaelite taste. While touring the Mont Blanc, he is befriended by John Ruskin, who introduces him to other members of the brotherhood (William Holman Hunt, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Ford Madox Brown, and William Morris). Converted to Ruskin’s revaluation of medieval painting, Raycie purchases a selection of “Italian Primitives” (pre-Renaissance artists such as Giotto, Piero della Francesca, Vittore Carpaccio, and Fra Angelico). Returning to New York with his acquisitions, however, he finds that the aesthetic jet lag is greater than he expected: his father practically disowns him and dies soon after (his demise hastened, apparently, by his son’s lack of judgment). Reduced to genteel poverty, Raycie transforms a section of his residence into a “Gallery of Christian Art” and spends the rest of his days trying to persuade the public of the merits of his collection (64). Only after his death, however, does the New York art world appreciate pre-Renaissance painting. Ironically, the necessary judgment devices reach Raycie’s collection later than the rest of New York—someone “connected with the Louvre” stumbles upon the clueless new owner, while she is scrubbing one of the Old Masters with soap and hot water (79). The paintings sell for a fortune (one of them is acquired by the National Gallery in London).7

Wharton’s novella calls to mind the site-specificity and materiality of aesthetic authority as there is no clearly datable rise of the Pre-Raphaelite taste formation that transforms the Italian Primitives from antiquarian trivia to radiant artworks. Rather, the relevant judgment devices are attached to specific bodies and things that move across intricate exchange networks circulating commercial, cultural, and affective values as exemplified by Raycie’s friendship with Ruskin and the brotherhood that connected him to a larger figuration of personal and institutional trust relationships ramified across high-cultural Europe.8 The crucial transformation at the background of Wharton’s novella came in 1851, when Ruskin’s embrace of the Pre-Raphaelite cause helped to bring about a shift within the European art world that elevated both Ruskin’s critical judgment and the painterly practices of the brotherhood to the position of a charismatic avant-garde while downgrading the reigning Reynoldsian paradigm to the level of a commercial and “academic” mainstream (Hewison 203). The overlap of Ruskin’s and the Pre-Raphaelites’ judgment devices arguably led to a felicitous “bundling” of two “materialities”: for those who were drawn to the aesthetics of Pre-Raphaelite painting, Ruskin’s defense of realism and medievalism
provided prestigious concepts with which to theorize and explain their aesthetic sense (Keane 188). Ruskin’s rise in the field therefore authorized the painterly practices as well as the theoretical vocabularies that justified these practices. At the same time, when Pre-Raphaelite painting was raised to the level of a recognized avant-garde, Ruskin’s critical claims became all the more convincing, leading to the consecration of the painterly aesthetics and encouraging its adherents to suspend the skeptical questioning of Ruskin’s philosophy of art.

In the context of Wharton’s novella, therefore, Raycie returns to New York as an emissary of what in London counts as a higher aesthetic law in that his collection extends Greenwich-meridional time into a more peripheral space. But since the authority of Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelites effectively ends outside Raycie’s gallery, the art world of Wharton’s old New York reduces his artifacts to genteel trash—the gallery has virtually no visitors, and after Raycie’s death, the paintings are stashed in a succession of dusty attics and almost auctioned off with the old furniture—until the representative of the Louvre reconverts them into high-cultural singularities.

Casanova’s model helps us to see Raycie’s predicament as an effect of unequal power relations within the relevant institutional networks: since the tastemakers closer to the meridian are generally perceived as more trustworthy than those from remoter areas (they have more symbolic power, visibility, prestige, presence, institutional charisma), the Ruskinian value categories emerging from London and Paris were more heavily weighted in the transatlantic debate than those of Gilded-Age New York. Since the European institutions had a greater capability to make a difference in the relevant networks, the US art world was more likely to adopt the foreign view than to impose its own taste formation abroad. Being forced to import one’s judgment from abroad (rather than produce and export one’s own) creates the temporal lag that explains the late arrival of meridional taste (when the Ruskinian Charles Eliot Norton became the first chair of art history at Harvard in 1875). 9

2. Herder Effects

Of course, Wharton downplays the relevance of the material network by insisting on the universality of aesthetic standards. Her man from the Louvre does not represent a central position in a globally connected art world but simply the most advanced knowledge about painting in the world. This universalizing conception of value is flattering for cosmopolitans like Wharton and Raycie who happen to be in step with Greenwich-meridional taste. For provincials locked in local time (like Raycie’s US detractors), it can be more gratifying
to turn the tables on the Greenwich authorities by claiming the cultural specificity of their taste. Casanova calls this move the “Herder effect,” after the pioneer of cultural relativism in early German romanticism, Johann Gottfried Herder.

The Herder effect converts scales of hierarchical universal values (e.g., Giotto is a better painter than Raphael) into a structure of differences in equality (both Giotto and Raphael are good painters, on their own terms). In the context of Wharton’s story, therefore, the Herder effect enabled the nineteenth-century US art world to reject Pre-Raphaelite aesthetics as essentially un-American, by proclaiming medieval art to be either irrelevant to what the US needs (as in Emerson’s “We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe”) or stylistically out of sync with the rhythms of a democratic interiority (as in Whitman’s claim that the aesthetic of “feudalism” fails to “tally” with the “music of democracy”).

The more general legacy of the Herder effect, an expressive-identity model of literature, is at odds with the idea of a meridional authority. Indeed, the most intuitive objection to Casanova’s endeavor to trace the inequalities of world literary space stems from an ingrained definition of the literary as a representative form by which cultural identities express themselves. It seems then that the transnational turn in literary criticism has not altogether displaced the Herderian framework as many transnational readings only extend the expressive source or relate them to a geographically and historically more remote set of influences.

3. National Influence

Consider Lawrence Buell’s contention in his recent Dream of the Great American Novel (2014) that Casanova’s claims about US literature being on the “far periphery” of the cultural map before 1930 are “amnesiac” because she ignores “Poe’s impact on Baudelaire, Mallarmé, Valéry” (46). At some abstract level, Buell is of course right: Baudelaire’s discovery of Poe was crucial for the development of French symbolism, which in turn became foundational for fin-de-siècle French modernism. But there is an asymmetry here that one-dimensional influence models tend to obscure. When Baudelaire discovered Poe and translated his work into French, he transformed him from a minor author to a world-renowned literary figure; this process was hardly reciprocal for if Poe had discovered Baudelaire in the 1840s, it presumably would have made little difference either to French literary culture or Baudelaire’s situation in the world.

To grasp this asymmetry, we need to distinguish between two aspects of circulation. The first concerns the direction of a simple
transfer of cultural materials: Poe is an American author in the sense that he was born and wrote most of his works in the US; in the 1850s, his works crossed the Atlantic to influence Baudelaire. But the second, arguably more fundamental aspect concerns the origin and direction of the judgment devices that define whether and how Poe (and indeed which kind of Poe) could become modern literature. While the one-dimensional influence paradigm assumes a singular US product that managed to conquer the European market, we should distinguish between two of Poe’s social lives that are only remotely alike: there is Baudelaire’s Poe, who begins to dominate world literary space by the end of the nineteenth century. And there is the more genteel Poe who persisted in the literary establishments in Boston and New York until the US literary field adopted the judgment devices of world literary space. Paris had a central position insofar as its consecrating institutions had the authority to convince other literary centers within the relevant global networks that Baudelaire’s Poe is the more authentic one. The point here is not only to recall the degree to which our twentieth-century understanding of Poe is a product of French modernism but also to insist on the transformative effects of institutional power differentials. Merely to say that Poe became world literature because he happened to have “gained” rather than “lost” in “translation,” in David Damrosch’s influential definition, seems rather like suggesting that in some automobiles, gasoline happens to emit more rather than less energy, as if the agency of different combustion engines were too irrelevant to mention (34).

In the case of Baudelaire and Poe, it seems useful to distinguish between the authority of the Paris-based networks to which Baudelaire was connected and the authority of the imagined national tradition (Literary America) that these networks produced. As Évan Horowitz points out, at times Baudelaire seems more fascinated by Poe and other Anglophone poets (Longfellow, Tennyson, and Browning) than by his Italian or German contemporaries: “his gaze is resolutely turned towards England and the United States” (119). Yet the imagined tradition of Literary America to which Baudelaire is attracted is nonetheless a Parisian production in the sense that its meaning is defined by meridional networks rather than by national literary institutions in the US alone. One aspect of Baudelaire’s translation of Poe is therefore that it furthered the presence of Literary America on the world literary map, analogous to the Parisian recognition of Joyce that, according to Casanova, created an independent Literary Ireland. Now just as 1920s Dublin is unable to control the world literary significance of Joyce, the local literary establishments in the nineteenth-century US have only a partial say in the transnational conversations about what Literary America is like and how it is positioned in world literary space. One consequence of this
divergence, between imagined national traditions and the transnational institutions that are allowed to define their meaning and significance, was that the Literary America that circulated through nineteenth-century world literary space is more primitivist than its local counterparts in the US (recall that Whitman’s image of democratic savage resonated with the European critics long before it became acceptable in the Boston literary establishment).\textsuperscript{11}

These asymmetries were of course reversed in the post-1945 period, when the Greenwich center shifted toward a US-based culture of the school and higher education became a “center of a world system of science and scholarship” (Altbach 316). One important lesson of this is that Casanova’s temporal account of world literary authority (“the richest spaces are also the oldest” [World 82]) needs to be qualified. While it is true that the historical age of a literary tradition can be a factor of its performative weight, the world literary rise of the US (like the continued marginality of Chinese literary culture) suggests that the “richest” spaces are not the oldest but those that happen to catch on with meridional power.\textsuperscript{12}

4. Subnational Influence (High Cultural Pluralism)

So how can we identify the meridional agencies in the field of US literature since the 1960s, where references to national identity have largely been displaced by subnational authenticity models? The standard literary histories still reach for Herderian liberation narratives to explain the turn to identity since the 1960s: the rise of the ethno-racial novel (Toni Morrison’s \textit{Song of Solomon} [1977], Sandra Cisneros’s \textit{The House on Mango Street} [1984], or Maxine Hong Kingston’s \textit{The Woman Warrior} [1976]) is attributed to minority life-worlds that are said now to influence the culture at large and that have transformed the literary field into a tapestry of diverse cultural identities. One can certainly read hyphenated-American novels as ethnographic reports. But as McGurl points out, some of the most iconic “high-cultural pluralists” crafted their literary voices within academic institutions (Cisneros at Iowa, N. Scott Momaday at Stanford [337, 243]), where they engaged and competed with other aspiring writers on a “shared ground” that was not an ethnic life world but “the literary field as it was made concrete in the university classroom” (337). Their subnational identities emerged in a literary space when it made professional sense, that is, when a shift in the consecrating institutions connected the otherness of the ethnic voice with meridional power. This does not mean that ethno-racial fiction cannot be motivated by a genuine politics in defiance of real social marginalization. It means rather that because the value categories that
turn Morrison, Cisneros, and Louise Erdrich into prize-winning singularities are shaped by a US-based culture of the school, their work no more “represents” the ethno-racial lifeworlds associated with them than the discourse of folk authenticity brings Herderian intellectuals into a real dialogue with the eighteenth-century peasant class. The centrality of ethnic or racial experience in the Anglophone literary field therefore tells us less about lived marginality than it does about the shifts within higher institutions that made marginality a literary asset, what McGurl identifies as the “overlapping institutionalization of elitist high modernism and cultural pluralism in university English departments” (58).

5. Trust, Sacralized Economies, and Strong Values (Franzen’s Shame)

These realities of cultural authority do not sit well with our democratic ethos. If US society contains a plurality of lifeworlds that seem equally deserving of recognition, why should their respective taste cultures submit to value hierarchies defined by elite institutions? This conundrum came to the fore vividly in Jonathan Franzen’s well-publicized encounter with Oprah Winfrey. Recall the main bone of contention: when The Corrections (2001) became an “Oprah pick” in the September of the same year, Franzen admitted in a Powells.com interview that the more “schmaltzy” novels featured in Winfrey’s book club made him “cringe” (“Jonathan Franzen Uncorrected”). In the ensuing media flap, this was pitched as an insult to the general readership; indeed, Franzen conceded this point and back-pedaled in public: “I know that the distinction between high audiences and low audiences is false,” he said to the Chicago Tribune in November 2001 and apologized to Winfrey (“Franzen vs. the Oprah Factor”). His retraction confirmed a public suspicion that high–low distinctions are self-serving fantasies devised within a reactionary “priesthood of English professors” (Collins 21).

Perhaps we can get a better sense of Franzen’s dilemma, I think, if we use Charles Taylor’s distinction between strong and weak values. When we are in the sphere of weaker values—“I like strawberry and you vanilla,” in Taylor’s example (Dilemmas 297)—our choice occurs mainly in what I call an economy of the everyday, where it is comparatively easy to tolerate difference: whether people prefer burgundy or beer, Morrison or Dan Brown, or become connoisseurs of baseball history or Wagner opera, all of these choices seem equally valuable as long as they deliver subjective satisfaction. And this viewpoint encourages us to embrace a delivery or satisfaction model of literature that informs the ethos of contemporary
cultural studies: if people draw pleasure, instruction, or redemption from popular or middlebrow novels, why in the world should they care about academic definitions of literariness? It is from this viewpoint—the logic of weak valuation—that Franzen’s put-down of the middlebrow seemed snobbish and undemocratic, and which arguably led him to retract and apologize.

The delivery model breaks down, however, once our consumption choices get entangled with strong values. This seems obvious enough if we move from disagreeing about ice cream flavors to debating issues that concern divisive moral-political convictions, like abortion, or human rights. Strong values make it harder to tolerate a plurality of opinions because they touch upon a core of moral “hyper-goods” (Taylor Sources 63) that we experience as non-negotiable; they are “sacralized” in the sense that they are immune to the skeptical questions of rational argument (Joas 5). What is less obvious is that hypergoods shape people’s sense of orientation not just within moral-philosophical, religious, or political domains, but also within a larger horizon of trust relations. People have an incorporated intuition about how all their practical moves, including their uses of cultural or aesthetic products, affect the way they are situated or placed in relation to something like a “charismatic” site of authority (Shils 140). Thus, aesthetic or literary practices, too, can be perceived in terms of either weaker or stronger valuations: for some the difference between Morrison’s Beloved (1987) and HBO’s Games of Thrones is merely about the question of what entertainment one prefers (I like Nobel Prize fiction, you like quality TV), but for others, it may well be about being put into contact with the higher life of the culture.

Thus, at some level, Franzen’s response to Oprah is a weak-value issue: for reasons that have to do with his personal reading habits, he does not like popular romances. But Franzen’s “cringing” is less about aesthetic dislike than about losing ground within a sacralized topography, which rests on a public structure of feeling rather than on personal taste. There is a collective sense—embodied in the most authoritative taste formations and materialized within central consecrating institutions—that crossing over into Oprahland from the field of prize-winning fiction means inevitably to be distanced from charismatic authority. Franzen’s shame about the prospect of his Oprahification may seem impolite—it surely puts Oprah and her audience in an awkward position—but it is a social fact that cannot be theorized away with an ethics of democracy or a politics of recognition. His embodied sense of strong-value distinctions (high-low, singular/cheap, sacred/profane, pure/impure, etc.) goes deeper than his theories about these distinctions.

One reason that the collective basis of charismatic authority is easily overlooked is the widespread impression that the US’ vast and
democratic marketplace, with the rise of Amazon and other new “delivery systems” (Collins 12), has led to an erosion of literary canons and consecrating institutions. But the preoccupation with reports from the literary culture industry (45 million copies of the Fifty Shades of Grey trilogy were sold in three years in the US alone [Flood]) distracts us from recognizing the degree to which sacred and everyday economies can coexist in perfect harmony with one another. It is well possible, in today’s extended cultural system, to sense the strong value of the Nobel Prize and still prefer to stay within the lay practice of everyday entertainment, leaving the more sacralized practices to the prize-winning virtuosi and their bookish readerships, without experiencing Franzen’s shame. But it is also possible to become susceptible to the calling, as it were, of specific consecrating institutions, and begin to desire the acquisition of a higher taste, in which case truly enjoying a consecrated work (rather than just sensing its charisma) can be experienced as a form of spiritual upward mobility.

Given the potential simultaneity of sacred and everyday concerns, a writer striving for charismatic recognition may well be thrilled with the prospect of becoming a national bestseller (as Franzen said he was when Oprah called) without being incoherent or a hypocrite. Nor does it seem odd to be ambivalent when the higher and lower economies overlap (Franzen being both glad and ashamed about having an Oprah label stamped on his novel), though the degree of ambivalence depends on the individual case (if Morrison was less troubled by Winfrey’s embrace, perhaps her Nobel-enhanced credentials as a difficult writer helped to render her all but immune to any contact stigmatization). All of which is to say that while cultural authority has a collective basis, it can only be traced and charted ethnographically, with a phenomenological reconstruction of specific trust relationships that differ in their ability to summon public trust.14

6. Henry James in Paris, Ben Lerner in the Program

Let me attempt to trace the phenomenology of trust in two novels that offer very different views of how US literary production locates itself in the world, Henry James’s The Ambassadors (1903), and Ben Lerner’s Leaving the Atocha Station (2011).

Here is the main premise of The Ambassadors: Lambert Strether from Woollett, Massachusetts, has been sent to Paris by the woman he intends to marry, Mrs. Newsome, on a mission to rescue her son Chad from the temptations of Bohemia, manifested by Mme. de Vionnet. When he finds the prodigal son to have profited from Paris Strether advises him to stay, effectively forfeiting his prospects
of marriage and financial security. As a Jamesian aesthete, Strether has a pronounced reluctance to embrace moral certainties or creeds, but his acute sense of where he stands, within the bigger picture of his life journey, provides a complex phenomenology of the sacred–profane polarities James encountered in world literary space.

Upon his arrival in Paris around 1900, the 55-year-old Strether remembers an earlier visit he undertook as a young man in the late 1860s. Apparently, this first visit was a “pilgrimage” intended to “form” a “relation” with “the higher culture,” and when he returned, he was sure to have “gained something great” (78). His connection to the higher culture was evidenced by a dozen “lemon-colored” French paperbacks he brought back from Paris (79). Like Raycie’s Italian primitives, these artifacts extended Greenwich Mean Time into the belated US scene, but ultimately they suffered a similar neglect. As the middle-aged Strether notes so many decades later, the “lemon-colored volumes” are “still somewhere at home” in Woollett, “stale and soiled and never sent to the binder” (79). Unlike Wharton’s Raycie, for whom contact with the higher culture required an art-religious care of the consecrated works, the younger Strether apparently behaved like a lay reader: he could acknowledge the sacredness of the higher culture without feeling he had to integrate it fully into his daily activities. To put this point in Taylor’s terminology: most people differ from spiritual virtuosi in that they are content with a “stabilized middle position,” where the “routine order” (Secular 6) of their daily activities allows them to be placed at some livable distance from their perceived site of charismatic authority, or “fullness” (5), as long as this does not render them disoriented, making them lose their “a sense of where this place of fullness is, even of what fullness could consist in” (6). In this case, being oriented toward Paris provided sufficient contact with the charismatic for the younger Strether—owning the yellow paperbacks as a token of his “pilgrimage” was enough to feel in touch.

With the aging Strether’s growing suspicion that his life is turning into a failure, this middle position becomes unstable. His daily activities as an editor of the Woollett Review—“[his] one presentable scrap of an identity” (64)—do not prevent an accumulating sense of exhaustion: “If ever a man had come off tired Lambert Strether was that man” (76). It only takes “forty-eight hours of Paris” to turn his vague unease and tiredness into the concrete shame of having gotten lost in what suddenly strikes him as Woollett’s “hum of vain things” (76). As he wanders past the bookshops and artist-types of the Latin Quarter, the “stale and soiled” state of the “lemon-colored volumes” shelved in their paper wrappers at home now strikes him as “a symbol of his long grind” (79).
The remaining action in *The Ambassadors*’ turns on Strether’s gradual recovery of a new middle position that brings his daily activities closer to the charismatic. Mrs. Newsome provides the necessary framework for this: her generosity makes Strether’s Paris trip a kind of sabbatical (a “breathing-time” he was “thankful for” [76]), which allows him to work on his intellectual make-over. As his sense of higher purpose overrides his felt duty as a future husband, he turns a relatively straightforward mission (bringing home the prodigal son) into a complex intellectual task (determining how one should live) that becomes inseparable in his eyes from deciphering the moral value of Paris, which “hung before him” like “some huge iridescent object” (81). When Strether’s counterintuitive reading of Parisian Bohemia costs him Mrs. Newsome’s trust, he accepts the consequential break with Woollett: an intellectual virtuoso does not give up his sense of the real for mundane interests like marriage and wealth.

James sometimes frames Strether’s disinterestedness in Arnoldian terms, as a liberation from philistinism: the atmosphere of Paris is said to put Strether’s imagination in free play, enabling him to look at the evidence more creatively and from all possible directions until he finally sees things as they really are (“in the light of Paris one sees what things resemble” [155]). But at another level, Strether’s imagination does not so much break free as adapt to a different experiential rhythm, giving him the sense that he is being pulled “further and further ‘in’” (294) to the Parisian world, toward a meridional center that does not seem to have a recognizable endpoint, since each approximation reveals a new horizon: “there was always more behind what [Mme. de Vionnet] showed, and more and more again behind that” (400). We might say that Strether moves so deeply into professional intellectual habits that, one after the other, the novel’s principal characters are left behind.15 His return to the US, at the end of the novel, is an act of renunciation that, in fact, brings him closer to Paris and its modernist standards of disinterestedness.

Ben Lerner’s *Leaving the Atocha Station* invests the Jamesian international theme with a completely different sense of global cultural authority. The main protagonist, a prize-winning poet named Adam Gordon who has just been graduated with an MFA from Brown University, spends one year in Madrid on a Fulbright scholarship (like Lerner himself [Rogers 219]). Adam is also drawn toward the higher culture beyond the hum of vain things, and like Strether, he seems to awaken to his quest through contact with the European art scene.

When the novel opens Adam has just arrived in Spain and feels a little like an impostor, dodging the Fulbright organizers because he is scared they might see through him. Adam’s vague anxieties about being a fraud become more concrete when during one of his ritual visits to Madrid’s Museo del Prado, he witnesses a man who
suddenly breaks into tears while contemplating one of the paintings, “convulsively catching his breath” (8). This reminds Adam of his own sense of disconnection: “I had long worried that I was incapable of having a profound experience of art (8).” In Adam’s words, “Although I claimed to be a poet” and had earned “my fellowship in Spain” on the basis of “my supposed talent as a writer,” “I tended to find lines of poetry beautiful only when I encountered them quoted in prose, in the essays my professors had assigned in college, where the line breaks were replaced with slashes, so that what was communicated was less a particular poem than the echo of poetic possibility” (8–9). Hence “the closest” Adam had ever “come to having a profound experience of art was probably the experience of this distance, a profound experience of the absence of profundity” (9).

For all his worries about being unresponsive to the higher aesthetic pleasures, Adam is also “intensely suspicious of people who claimed a poem or painting or piece of music ‘changed their life’” (8). Indeed, the behavior of the weeping stranger would seem to confirm this suspicion: Just having “released a sob” over an artwork “attributed to San Leocadio,” “the man walked calmly into [Room] 56, stood before [Hieronymus Bosch’s] The Garden of Earthly Delights, considered it calmly, then totally lost his shit” (9). After one more “fit of weeping” in front of another picture, he heads “calmly for the museum’s main exit” (10). Clearly, the episode seems so absurd because beholders of paintings can “lose” their “shit” only so many times before their “profound experience” becomes part of a quotidian ritual—like ritualized tears over the daily installment of one’s favorite soap opera.

Lerner’s debunking of insincere affect makes for great comedy, and at one point Adam finds himself shanghaied into a poetry reading organized by his artsy new Spanish friends in a Salamanca art gallery. The Spanish poet who opens the reading, Tomás, seems an unwitting caricature of a tortured romantic genius. Looking “less like he was going to read poetry and more like he was going to sing flamenco or weep,” he proceeds to read a selection of poems that strike Adam as “an Esperanto of clichés: waves, heart, pain, moon, breast, beach, emptiness, etc.” (37). Hoping that the whole performance might be intentional “parody,” Adam is dismayed that the organizer’s “face implied he was having a profound experience of art” (37), that everyone listened to this drivel “as though it were their daily language passing through the crucible of the human spirit and emerging purified, redeemed” (38). When it is Adam’s turn to read his more experimental, language-centered writing, the audience is similarly enthusiastic, but he becomes aware that “this was less because of any particular response they’d had to my reading than because I had been presented to them as a significant foreign writer” (42).
The trouble with Adam, to be sure, is his complicity with the art world’s fakery and snobbism: being applauded for all the wrong reasons “felt good” to him (43). The novel’s most hilarious passages concern his attempts at impressing his Spanish love interests with orphic sayings in his weak Spanish, hoping they would intuit “incommunicable depths” (28) and “a plurality of possible profound meanings” in his “fragmentary speech” (46). At one point, he even finds himself pretending that his lack of poise in social situations stems from an ineffable personal trauma, “I was shocked to hear myself say: My mother died” (29); in another instance, he feels the urge to adapt to his hosts’ ideal of poetry as a political weapon, “with an alarming fervor . . . I wanted my ‘work’ to take on the United States of Bush” (101). In a somewhat Jamesian attempt to connect with higher culture, Adam plans to improve his language skills “by reading masterworks of Spanish literature,” imagining how the “archaic flavor and formally heightened rhetoric” of the canonical tradition going back to Cervantes “would collide with the mundanities of daily life, giving the impression less of someone from a foreign country than someone from a foreign time” (19). But in contrast to James, his quest to penetrate the heart of the Spanish tradition is driven, again, by a desire to impress, fantasizing as he does, about the moment when his Spanish friends would realize that their “failure to understand me was not the issue of my ignorance or accent but their own remove from the zenith of their language” (19).

When Lerner describes Adam’s breakthrough—his realization that not having profound experiences of art is really a sign of a more mature sensibility—his tone becomes more serious. On a train ride toward Granada, Adam finds that the rhythm of the train seems “mimetic” of the rhythm of his reading, which reminds him of one of the few writers he could describe “as a ‘major poet’ without irony, John Ashbery” (91). Reading random passages from Ashbery’s Selected Poems (1986), Adam discovers the power of negativity: The best Ashbery’s poems, he believes, “refer to how their reference evanesces,” demonstrating the “mediacy” of experience so as to “allow you to attend to your attention, to experience your experience, thereby enabling a strange kind of presence” (91).

While Strether’s redemption hinges on his getting “further and further ‘in,’” Adam’s discovery of negative capability is really a homecoming. On his arrival in Spain, the Ashbery volume is already in his luggage, and his encounter with Spanish literature is as asymmetrical as Baudelaire’s discovery of Poe in that Adam’s “translation” of Federico Garcia Lorca assembles random, scrambled snippets of “Sevilla” into a collage of paratactical “new sentences” (16). The audience in the Salamanca art gallery finds it hard to respond to Adam’s language-centered work—its judgment devices
emerged, after all, from an academic space of production in which the dividing lines between creative writing and specialized scholarship ("planet MFA" and "planet PhD") have been maximally blurred.17 But no matter how much Adam considers himself a poetically unmusical fraud, those of his Spanish peers who matter most to him never waver in their trust. Teresa, a talented and prestigious young poet herself, and his most serious love interest, has not only taken the trouble to translate his poems for a bilingual Spanish edition but also assures Adam that he is indeed "a wonderful poet, a serious poet": "When are you going to stop pretending that you are only pretending to be a poet?" (168).

If Lerner’s novel reflects the institutional hierarchies of world literary space, it is also a textbook example of how contemporary literary establishments insist on the irrelevance of these hierarchies, in accord with Casanova’s point that the richest regions in world literary space tend to be blind to its inequalities. Lerner’s critique of poetic insincerity sustains the unity of the aesthetic event with a gatekeeping gesture that feels so natural to literature and art criticism that we hardly notice its main conceptual move: to distinguish between primary and secondary affective reactions to literary artifacts. Primary aesthetic pleasures—in Lerner’s account, the “strange kind of presence” of Ashbery’s poetry—are deemed rational in the sense of being grounded in the logic of the work (like Ashbery’s material resistance to closure). Irrational pleasures are the fetishistic, quasi-religious, or libidinous emotions that emerge in commercial culture industries or middlebrow institutions such as Winfrey’s book club or Lerner’s philistine other, the voice-based poetry workshop). These are classified as secondary because it is assumed that the logic of the work precedes markets and institutions and can therefore not be held accountable for the affective reactions (fits of weeping) produced by markets and institutions. From this viewpoint, the art-religious individuals in Lerner’s novel are either fraudulent snobs (pretending to be touched by the higher objects while actually playing for social distinction), or worse, they think they are having aesthetic experiences when in reality they are in the thrall of something else (fetishes, transitional objects, pseudo-religions, etc.). The claim I make in this essay is that the charismatic attraction of things (the way Ashbery might embody something larger, within a sacred economy) is just as real as their more direct uses (the practical or pedagogical value, say, of Ashbery’s politics of form).
Notes


2. Casanova’s suspicion of realism as a sign of commodification rests on a limited view of autonomy that she derives from a historical phase of the literary field, when the most prestigious works came from experimental writers associated with modernist or postmodernist avant-gardes, while more accessible realist–naturalist techniques were often considered complicit with commercial interests. This focus may be adequate for her favorite authors (Kafka, Joyce, Faulkner, Beckett, the South American magic realists), but it does not do justice to the more recent shifting of positions in the literary field that made the realism/experimentalism distinction less important to a writer’s literary prestige.


4. Since the rise of creative writing is only one aspect of the humanities revolution, the turn to the “program era” must be considered in terms of a changing cultural dispositif that transcends the biographical question of whether or not an author is or has been affiliated with the institution of the program. Chad Harbach’s distinction between “MFA vs. NYC” as separate literary “cultures” may address interesting differences between specific literary scenes, but it should not be understood as describing an actual outside of the program era (one that would allow, according to Caren Irr, unaffiliated writers such as Franzen or Gary Shteyngart to engage in “less institutionally minded” and “somewhat riskier” literary practices [8]). See Harbach, “Introduction,” MFA vs. NYC: The Two Cultures of American Fiction (2014), ed. Harbach 3–8 and Irr, Toward the Geopolitical Novel: U.S. Fiction in the Twenty-First Century (2013).

5. Perhaps Casanova’s book does not explicate the relevant material networks as much as one could, but her definition of world literary space lends itself well toward a network model, if only because it raises the question of exactly where the Parisian definitions of literary modernity have currency and through which routes of exchange they circulate across the world. Casanova’s concept of world literature is therefore easily misunderstood if it is conflated with concepts that are more inclusive, such as Damrosch’s “all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin” (4) or those that stress the diversity and “untranslatability” (Apter) of cultural experience. See, Emily Apter, Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability (2013) and Eric Hayot, On Literary Worlds (2012): 36, 38.

6. Karpik distinguishes five species of judgment devices: networks, rankings, brandings or product identity (appellations), influential critics (cicerones), and an apparatus of sales and modes of marketing or advertizing (confluences) (45). See also James English’s concept of a “cultural economy of prestige” in The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Cultural Value (2005).

7. The two historical collectors of Italian Primitivism on whom Wharton’s protagonist is based—Thomas Jefferson Bryan (1800–1870) and James Jackson Jarves (1818–1888)—had a slightly less dramatic fate. Both managed, with the help of

8. Ruskin’s interest in the Italian Primitives was triggered by a French revival (epitomized by Alexis-François Rio’s influential De la poésie chrétienne, [1836]) that connected prominent European intellectuals and institutions associated with the romantic-period revaluation of medieval art. Rereading Rio’s book in late 1844 prompted Ruskin to travel to Italy to study pre-Renaissance painting firsthand (Cook I: 168) and his resulting passion for the Italian trecento shapes the second volume of his Modern Painters (1846). Wharton’s models for Raycie, Bryan and Jarves, knew Ruskin through their Boston contact, Charles Eliot Norton, who was a friend of Ruskin’s and patron of Pre-Raphaelite art since the early 1850s. See Rio, Épilogue à l’art chrétien (1870) and E. T. Cook, The Life of John Ruskin (1911).

9. The relevance of these asymmetries become clearer if we consider how they were reversed with the shifting of the meridians after 1945, when the center of the Atlantic art world moved from Paris to New York (Guilbaut) in the wake of Clement Greenberg’s influential packaging of painterly abstraction as a touchstone of aesthetic modernism (Jameson 184). After 1945, the US art world would have had greater say in the rise of Ruskinianism. See Serge Guilbaut, How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War (1985) and Fredric Jameson, A Singular Modernity (2012).


12. Casanova has a point when she suggests that the “weight of France in American cultural life” today might be due to the amount of “literary credit” that the French literary tradition has accrued since the 1700s (World 166). But her claim that therefore Parisian literary theory (Derrida, Foucault, and others) has “powerfully influenced American campuses” (World 166) is only tenable in the sense that while the gaze of US intellectuals is directed toward Parisian literary theory, the greater performative weight in the conversations about which kind of deconstruction is cutting edge lies with a New Haven or Berkeley-centered culture of the school. The iconic Derrida we encounter in world literary space today arguably has a US imprint that might well be considered primitivist from the viewpoint of 1960s philosophy departments in Paris.

13. McGurl shows how seamlessly the ethos of the countercultural fits into the patronage networks of the postwar university: with the rising student populations of the 1950s and 1960s, the interconnecting planets PhD and MFA became institutionalized “heterotopias” (199) that did not so much tolerate as demand from their inhabitants the cultivation of difference and dissent.
14. It is possible to express the nonrational basis of sacralized values by describing our trust in cultural authority as a kind of “faith” (Giddens) or “belief” (Casanova, *World* 40). The trouble with this religious analogy is that it can provoke critical realists (especially those who, like the new atheists, reduce religious practice to a series of unverifiable propositions about the world) to insist that Franzen should have overcome his embodied trust with a healthy dose of enlightened skepticism. Casanova herself suggests, in an unfortunate phrase, that “one way to resist” the inequalities of world literary space “is to adopt an ‘atheist’ stance, and not to believe” in the “dominance” and the “prestige” of its authorities (“Dominant” 380). See Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity* (1990) and Casanova, “What Is a Dominant Language? Giacomo Leopardi: Theoretician of Linguistic Inequality,” *New Literary History* 44.3 (Summer 2013): 379–99.

15. Mrs. Newsome is the first to recede from Strether’s advancing viewpoint and by the novel’s close the former Parisian vanguard has also failed to keep up: Chad backsliding toward a career in advertising, Mme. de Vionnet disintegrating under Strether’s “beautiful patience” like a “maidservant crying for her young man” (403), and Maria Gostrey being reduced to a “country maiden, all passive modest and grateful” as Strether “lead[s] her about Paris” (406).

16. Lerner has explained Adam’s poetics in various interviews. See Rogers and Lin.


**Works Cited**


