



BRILL

The Indie Nobel?

Stockholm, New York, and Twenty-First-Century Literary Value

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Abstract

The work of nine of the last ten non-Anglophone winners of the Nobel Prize in literature is – or, in a few cases, was – mainly published in the United States and the United Kingdom by independent publishers. This essay draws on the resources of the interdisciplinary field of valuation studies to show that this phenomenon is not only a reflection of commercial considerations but also reveals differences in the way the Nobel Committee, independent publishers, and conglomerate publishers articulate literary value. Paying special attention to the discourses of justification around J.M.G. Le Clézio, the essay shows how the Committee's emphasis on documentation, truth, and witness gets refracted in, on the one hand, a focus on serious and melancholic postures of witness in the literary value discourse characterizing the New York-centered literary upmarket segment, and a celebration of cross-cultural curiosity in the case of independent publishers on the other.

Keywords

independent publishers – literary value – Nobel Prize – valuation studies – witnessing

1 The Nobel Prize Goes Indie

And then the paper ran out. When the Zanzibar-born and UK-based writer Abdulrazak Gurnah was the surprising winner of the 2021 Nobel Prize in lit-

erature, the publishing market was unable to meet the subsequent sudden increase in customer demand for Gurnah's books. Gurnah was a writer of a decidedly minor profile, and most of his works were out of print in the UK. His last novel, the 2020 *Afterlives*, hadn't even been published in the USA. Global logistics logjams meant that publishers were unable to print, and booksellers unable to stock, Gurnah's works. In the last twenty years, Gurnah was published in the UK by (the large but independent) Bloomsbury, while the American publication rights for his catalogue were up for grabs at the time of the Nobel announcement (Alter). It may seem remarkable that the Nobel Prize Committee consecrated a writer who failed to find recognition in the world of conglomerate publishing which, in the last decades, has increasingly come to dominate the Anglophone literary market – and, because of the dominant position of this market, the world literary sphere as a whole (Fisk 8; Sapiro; Sinykin). Indeed, there is perhaps no clearer indication that the Committee's conception of literary value differs from the one that pertains in the world of literary upmarket publishing (the term is Giséle Sapiro's) than this: it elected a writer who also used to be an academic (Gurnah is an Emeritus Professor of English and Postcolonial Literatures at the University of Kent) and who in that capacity edited *The Cambridge Companion to Salman Rushdie* – one of the darlings of the global literary upmarket segment, with, for instance, seven Booker nominations, one Booker win, and one Best of the Booker win (for the best Booker Prize winner between 1968 and 2008). It is hard to be more celebrated than Rushdie – in London, in New York, but not, apparently, in Stockholm.

In this essay, I argue that this divergence is no coincidence but points to fundamental dynamics in the production of world literary value in the twenty-first century. It is customary to observe that in this century, New York has replaced Paris as the global center of literary consecration (*Casanova World Republic* 74): New York is home to the four massive publishing conglomerates that dominate the (itself globally dominant) Anglophone book market, as well as to taste-making publications such as the *New York Review of Books* and the *New Yorker*, and is thus a key hub in the global dissemination of literary value. And while it is tempting to assume that this domination has absorbed all forms of literary autonomy and diversity, the case of Gurnah, whose failure to find traction in the literary upmarket segment did not prevent him from winning the Nobel, shows that significantly different versions of literary value persist. In fact, Gurnah's Nobel success and relative literary upmarket neglect is far from unique: the work of nine of the last ten non-Anglophone winners of the Nobel Prize in literature is – or, in a few cases, was – mainly published in the United States and the United Kingdom by independent publishers such as Arcade (Mo Yan), Fitzcarraldo (Svetlana Alexievich, Olga Tokarczyk, Annie Ernaux), Seagull

(Peter Handke, Herta Müller), Yale University Press (Patrick Modiano), Verba Mundi (J.M.G. Le Clézio, Modiano), and New Directions (Tomas Tranströmer).¹ In order to understand how literary value is articulated in the twenty-first century, then, we need to look beyond New York: to Stockholm, which Pascale Casanova called “a unique laboratory for the designation and definition of what is universal in literature” (“Literature as a World” 74), but also to the (often non-metropolitan) locations where Anglophone independent publishers operate. While this essay focuses on the production of literary value in the Anglosphere, a fuller account would also incorporate non-Anglophone hubs of consecration; the world literary trajectories of writers like Modiano and Ernaux are also powered by the cultural capital of the Gallimard publishing house, for instance, and writers like Müller and Handke did not depend on English translations to find recognition in Stockholm. For pragmatic reasons, my essay brackets non-Anglophone practices and discourses of valuation to study the discourse of literary value in what I consider the most salient sites of literary value articulation: the Anglosphere and the Nobel Prize.

The vital role of independent publishers signals that it would be a mistake to map the difference between New York and Stockholm onto that between heteronomy and autonomy, between commerce and creativity, between (to use terms popularized by Pierre Bourdieu) large-scale and restricted production. The sociology of literature has shown that literary upmarket publishing, far from cynically abandoning literary quality, consists in a delicate balancing act between financial and aesthetic considerations (Childress; Thompson). In the field of world literature studies, such all too dichotomous accounts proliferate, not least in the deeply influential Bourdieu-inspired projects of Pascale Casanova and Gisèle Sapiro. In French sociology, Bourdieu’s critique of value has been succeeded by (among other developments) more fine-grained pragmatic sociologies of actually existing practices of valuation – of how, in the words of sociologist Michèle Lamont, “value is produced, diffused, assessed, and institutionalized across a range of settings” (203). In this essay, I take my cue from the emerging interdisciplinary field of valuation studies (of which

1 Of the nine authors mentioned here, two also had a significant part of their output published by major publishers: Peter Handke, who has been publishing with FSG (now a division of MacMillan) since the early 70s, when FSG acquired independent publisher Hill & Wang, and Mo Yan, whose most popular works are published in the US by Viking Press (Random House). Apart from that, both have a significant part of their catalogue published by independent publishers. The only recent non-Anglophone Nobel Prize winner who is mainly published by major publishers is Mario Vargas Llosa, but even he has also been partly published by the independent Grove and a number of university presses.

French pragmatic sociology is a constituent) to analyze the way different segments of the world literary field – the major conglomerates feeding the literary upmarket niche, Anglophone independent publishers, and the Nobel Prize Committee – articulate value. I argue that differences between New York and Stockholm are not only a matter of commercial considerations, but rather of overlapping but significantly different understandings of what constitutes literary value.

The most obvious place to access the Stockholm value discourse is the jury citations that justify the selection of the Nobel Prize winner. The Nobel Prize citation is itself, in Benedict Anderson's mordant assessment, "one of the most mediocre genres of twentieth-century literature ... with its vapid humanism rendered in accumulations of cliché" (110). For all their bland sentimentality, these citations are yet the most overtly evaluative instances of literary value discourse. In the case of Gurnah, the citation again points to more general patterns of valuation. Gurnah, we read, was awarded the prize "for his uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism and the fate of the refugee in the gulf between cultures and continents." A concomitant official statement (tweeted by @NobelPrize, the official Twitter feed of the Nobel Prize) repeats the combination of relentless truth-telling and intercultural curiosity when it notes that "Abdulrazak Gurnah's dedication to truth and his aversion to simplification are striking. His novels recoil from stereotypical descriptions and open our gaze to a culturally diversified East Africa unfamiliar to many in other parts of the world." I argue that these two elements are central to the literary value discourse emanating from Stockholm in the twenty-first century, but that these two elements resonate differently in different spheres of literary value production: in the New York-centric literary upmarket sphere, literary value is organized around moralized postures of witness, memory, and truth; in independent publishing, intercultural mobility is the more prized characteristic.

2 Valuing Literature in the Twenty-First Century

In the field of world literary studies, literary value is still overwhelmingly studied in the terms established by Pierre Bourdieu and elaborated by the paradigm-setting projects of Pascale Casanova (which extends Bourdieu's accounts of cultural capital and the literary field to map "world literary space"; "Literature as a World" 72) and Gisèle Sapiro (which has meticulously studied the agents that help deliver literature across national borders). These accounts offer welcome corrections of the venerable humanist assumption that literary value is inherent in classic literary works that deserve to be celebrated as placeholders

of moral or even religious values. Bourdieu, famously, debunked such ascriptions of value as unwarranted universalizations of “dispositions associated with a particular social and economic condition” (493). For Bourdieu, the field of the aesthetic becomes an arena for a battle for prestige – which, in world literary studies, it still overwhelmingly is; even David Damrosch’s influential definition of world literature as “writing that gains in translation” (281) relies on a matrix of loss and gain that measures greatness through recognition.

In French sociology, and increasingly also in the interdisciplinary field of valuation studies that straddles sociology, anthropology, and economics, Bourdieu’s *critique* of value has made way for a study of the *pragmatics* of valuation. For sociologist Nathalie Heinich, this involves a shift “from value to valuation” – from the simple assertion of particular values to the “close observation of the operations by which actors actually manifest the value they assign to this object” (“Pragmatic Redefinition” 77). Such operations need not be verbal or argumentative: Heinich points to the value-bestowing “modalities” of measurement and attachment as two kinds of processes that can do without articulation (*Des Valeurs* 25). In the case of literature, this would mean, for instance, the practice of giving a book five stars on Goodreads, or buying it as a birthday gift for a friend, or carrying it around all day in your backpack. But other practices, such as literary judgment, do require articulation. Luc Boltanski and Laurent Thévenot’s *On Justification*, a landmark in the turn to pragmatic sociology, studies the arguments, proofs, comparisons, and tests people use to demonstrate the universality of their positions (13). In actual practice, Boltanski and Thévenot show, people are rarely content with a principled relativism or a “direct expression of interests” but aim to ground their preferences in relation to the common good, to a horizon of shared values (13, 20). We can think of the Nobel Prize citations as primary examples of such an appeal to consent: when Gurnah is commended for his “uncompromising and compassionate penetration of the effects of colonialism,” analytical insight and critical scrutiny of intercultural violence are posited as values; Gurnah is positioned as exemplifying these values; and addressees are implored to share both these values and this evaluation.² Indeed, even if we disagree in our evaluation of a particular work or author, the terms on which we disagree still point to the values that regulate our relation to the literary. They point, to quote Philippa

2 See Lamont for the difference between valuation and evaluation. The field of valuation studies has been consolidated with the founding of the journal *Valuation Studies* in 2013. The first issue contains useful state of the art essays by Helgesson and Muniesa and by Kjellberg and Mallard. Lamont offers the best account of the development of the field from its French contexts.

Chong, to “general beliefs about good books, good literary citizenship, and the proper place of art in contemporary society” (7). For philosopher Elizabeth Anderson, it is such argumentative appeals that distinguish values from “mere” preferences: “[w]hat identifies a liking as a mere liking is its relatively complete exemption from justificatory demands” (92); justification, in contrast, is “partly constituted by social norms of appropriateness that inhabit the public space of reasons” (94–95).

The field of valuation studies has studied such practices as wine tasting, electronic sounds, and luxury perfumes (Antal and Hutter), but it has not extensively interfaced with literary studies – Phillipa Chong’s study of American professional criticism is an exception (Chong). Nor has it rendered explicit the close proximity between the notion of valuation as an explicit, justificatory, and consent-demanding speech act and the traditional Kantian account of aesthetic judgment. In judging something beautiful, Kant argued, we are positing beauty as a feature of the object in order to “demand” (*fordern*) the agreement of others (Kant). Aesthetic judgments are rooted in personal experience, but positively demand agreement from everyone – very much like the justificatory scenario that Boltanski and Thévenot unearth in the everyday pragmatics of valuation and justification. There is, in other words, a deep and rarely observed affinity between pragmatic accounts of justification and the kind of discourse through which an aesthetic domain like that of literature bestows value on certain objects. The insistence that conflicts of taste need to be argued saves value pluralism from turning into a relativism that would abolish the distinction of the aesthetic and the literary and would amount to the “absolute commensurability of everything” (Guillory 323). It saves literature from becoming a mere commodity that can be measured by Amazon metrics.

Such justificatory practices are particularly acute in twenty-first-century world literary space. In the contemporary media ecology, the value of literature can no longer simply be assumed, *but it needs to be explicitly articulated*. As I have argued elsewhere (Vermeulen), because literature itself has lost its self-evident autonomy, such justifications often consist in articulating literary with contiguous value domains (memory, ethics, identity, cosmopolitanism, ...). Importantly, such articulations cannot fully surrender value to these contiguous domains if they want to avoid inadvertently arguing for literature’s ultimate irrelevance; they must position these other domains as what Niklas Luhmann has called “*Anlehnungskontexte*”: domains that support literature in a way that safeguards its relative autonomy (256).³ Twenty-first-century liter-

3 While I am obviously aware that the German language has a term for absolutely everything, I owe thanks to Carlos Spoerhase for pointing me to this particular notion.

ature, in other words, operates in a state of *disavowed heteronomy*, and it is the job of different literary value discourses to preserve a tenuous balance between worldly connection and relative independence. Indeed, one way to redefine world literary space is to see it as the domain where literary actors (writers, critics, publishers, juries, academics) articulate literary value so as to avoid the reduction of literature to pure entertainment. To map this space, tracing the pragmatics of valuation is as important as tracking struggles for prestige.

3 Le Clézio in America

By studying the value discourses that accrue to non-Anglophone Nobel Prize winners, together with their US publication and translation trajectories, in the last fifteen years, we can come to a diversified account of how literature is valued in the twenty-first century. It is on such a qualitative, interpretive study of, among others, the Nobel Prize citations, publication and translation histories, American reception, publisher websites, and selected paratexts of the American publications of the last nine non-Anglophone Nobel Prize winners that this essay reports.⁴ The case of J.M.G. Le Clézio turns out to be most paradigmatic. Le Clézio won the Nobel Prize in 2008 for what the Committee called “new departures, poetic adventure and sensual ecstasy, explor[ations] of a humanity beyond and below the reigning civilization.” After winning the prize, Le Clézio witnessed what most recent non-Anglophone Nobel Prize winners witness: the publication of one of his books by a major New York-based publisher, followed by a rapid return of his work to the catalogues of smaller independent publishers. In the case of Le Clézio, Simon & Schuster republished his 1963 debut *The Interrogation* a mere eight weeks after the announcement (no paper shortages then), only to lose interest in his work after that; later translations were published by the Boston-based independent publisher Godine and by Northwestern University Press, operating out of Evanston, Illinois. The difference is reflected in the way these editions articulate the literary value of Le Clézio’s

4 I do not consider recent Anglophone winners, as their Anglophone trajectories of publication and reception will obviously be significantly different from those of authors who need to be imported into the American literary system. First, unlike Gurnah, winners like Doris Lessing, Alice Munro, Kazuo Ishiguro, and Bob Dylan had been embraced by the New York literary upmarket institutions well before they won the Nobel Prize; second, as I show in my analysis, “translatedness” is a factor in the valorization of the non-Anglophone Nobel Prize winners, and this feature of course does not pertain to Anglophone winners.

work. The cover of the Simon & Schuster edition presents the work as, first of all, sexy and serious literature. The cover image is a black and white close-up of a young and handsome Le Clézio and his photogenic first wife Rosalie Piquemal. The cover invokes two authorities: that of the Nobel Prize Committee, and that of the *New York Review of Books*, a blurb from which presents Le Clézio as a formal innovator who has “altered the form of the novel”; the “About the Book” section reproduces 1964 copy that situates his work in the tradition of other formal innovators like Kafka, Beckett, and Joyce.⁵

What is conspicuously missing in Simon & Schuster’s casting of Le Clézio is the intercultural (rather than formal) adventurousness of his work that the Nobel citation foregrounded, and that then Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy Horace Engdahl highlighted when, following the announcement of the Prize, he called Le Clézio a “cosmopolitan” author.⁶ Nor is the name of the translator mentioned. This is very different from the Godine editions of Le Clézio’s work. Here, the name of the translator figures prominently; the cover art portrays cultural otherness; and the peritexts not only emphasize formal innovation and “verbal felicity,” as the Simon & Schuster edition does, but also foreground the works’ power “to cross cultural divides,” to paint “magnificent images” of nonwestern ways of life. Literary value, it seems, is articulated differently in different places – in Stockholm, New York, and in Boston and other sites from which independent publishers operate.

Le Clézio’s trajectory offers the most significant example of the tendencies I observe in twenty-first-century discourses of literary value. For one thing, it illustrates the vital role of independent Anglophone publishers for Nobel Prize winners (which again shows the case of Gurnah is not exceptional). Most recent non-Anglophone winners’ American careers are routed *not* through New York but through less mundane places such as Minneapolis (the home of Graywolf Press, the independent, non-profit publisher of Tomas Tranströmer), Boston (home to Godine, an independent press whose *Verba Mundi* series publishes both Le Clézio and Patrick Modiano), or Evanston, Illinois (the location of Northwestern University Press, where writers like Le Clézio and Olga Tokarczyk are published). Understanding this multipolar geography is key to understanding contemporary world literary value: even if non-Anglophone winners are published by major publishers *after* winning the Nobel Prize (Simon &

5 See Libman for a general account of how the American importation of the *nouveau roman* (to which Le Clézio’s early work belongs) cast it as a monument to European seriousness, rather than as the refusal of Sartrean commitment it instantiated in the French field.

6 As Jennifer Quist showed, exile and cosmopolitanism are crucial values for the Nobel jury (100).

Schuster for Le Clézio; Macmillan for Herta Müller; Random House for Svetlana Alexievich; Riverhead Books for Tokarczyk), their entrance into the American literary field typically occurs through independent publishers, and several of them return to indies when the Nobel effect wears off.

Recognition in the USA plays a decisive role in the global consecration of authors: publication by imprints of vast publishing conglomerates and consecration in such venues as the *New York Review of Books* (think of the blurb on the cover of Le Clézio's *Interrogation*), the *New York Times*, or the *New Yorker*, where critics like Susan Sontag and James Wood set the terms on which twenty-first-century literary upmarket success operates, are a vital step in the world literary consecration of such recent icons as W.G. Sebald, Roberto Bolaño, and Karl-Ove Knausgaard. As Amélie Hurkens and I have shown elsewhere, however, what actually happens when literary works achieve world literary status through their US consecration depends on a somewhat more complex division of labor between major and independent publishers (Vermeulen and Hurkens). The American literary field is marked by a fairly strict division of labor: independent publishers like Godine, Graywolf, and New Directions and several university presses provide vastly more new translations of foreign literature than the Big Four publishers combined; when these authors manage to find an audience (as happened for Bolaño and Sebald with New Directions and for Knausgaard with Archipelago), or win a Nobel Prize (as in the case of Tokarczyk, for instance, whose win moved her to Penguin-owned Riverhead Books),⁷ they routinely graduate to more lucrative publishing deals with major publishers, while the independent publishers are mostly only too happy to welcome them back when their commercial moment of grace expires. In this dispensation, it makes perfect sense, for instance, that Farrar, Straus and Giroux republish *The Deleted World*, a collection of poems by Tranströmer earlier published by a small UK publisher, only a few weeks after he won the Nobel Prize, only for later publications by Tranströmer to return to Graywolf, the nonprofit that already translated his earlier work.

4 Stockholm Values

It is easy to be cynical about this division of labor – as if conglomerates only care about the bottom line and only publish books that guarantee a profit. What

⁷ See Vara for the claim that being a potential Nobel Prize winner is one of the few incentives for major publishers to translate an author into English.

emerges from work in the sociology of publishing, however, is that literary publishers *do* care about literary value, *are* invested in literary recognition, and simply *can't afford* such cynicism, as cultural capital is as crucial to them as financial capital is (Childress; Thompson). Instead, it is by studying how major publishers, independent publishers, and, indeed, the Nobel Prize, which are all entangled with economic considerations in very different and more or less pressing ways, articulate value in different ways that we can begin to understand how literature is valued today. In order to gauge those articulations, we cannot only look at nakedly evaluative statements such as Nobel Prize citations; as Sianne Ngai notes, aesthetic judgment is “a performative that performs best when disguised as a constative” (40). As the example of Le Clézio showed, we can also pay attention to more subtly evaluative elements such as blurbs, reviews, comparisons, images, websites, and other element that bolster literary value by articulating it with other *Anlehnungskontexte* – innovation, moral seriousness, ethics, intercultural curiosity, etc.

In his book on the Nobel Prize and the formation of world literature, Paul Tenngart has carefully studied over a century of Nobel Prize citations, and has shown how the justification of value has shifted about every two decades from appeals to nobility, over craft, mastery, vernacularity, and universality, to a twenty-first-century insistence on the role of literature as a testimony to truth and an uncompromising commitment to an examination of reality, as when the jury notes that Naipaul's works “compel us to see” suppressed histories and Tomas Tranströmer's poetry “gives us fresh access to reality” or when other writers are said to “uncover,” “discover,” “reveal,” or “scrutinize” the world. Tenngart links these justifications to a conception of literature as a “counterforce to the digital challenges to the notion of objective truths, an antidote.” Such an entanglement of aesthetic value with ethical, social, and epistemological values is not surprising: aesthetic judgments not only demand concurrence but also justification, which, Ngai notes, “will always involve an appeal to extra-aesthetic judgments – political, moral, historical, cognitive, and so on” (Jasper and Ngai; see also Fisk 8). As Tenngart shows, Nobel Prize value discourse has in the last two decades linked literary value to the moral and epistemological values of examination and truth-telling.

Tenngart's emphasis on the literary value of attending to fact resonates with longtime Swedish Academy member Kjell Espmark's recent short book *The Nobel Prize in Literature – A New Century*. Espmark puts forward the notion of “witness literature” as central to the “new values” that the Nobel Prize promotes in the new century (13). Witness literature, for Espmark, speaks up “for the uncompromising independence and spiritual freedom which an author passionately seeks. What authors can contribute is their uncommonly keen

sensibility" (15). Espmark explicitly positions winners like Alexievich, Müller, and Tokarczyk under this label (18); remarkably, he regrets that Imre Kertész, in a 2001 symposium on witness literature, did *not* link the notion to Holocaust literature (15). This betrays that Espmark sees witness literature as an explicitly *ethical* category – as a kind of writing that takes on the moral duty of difficult remembrance. And it is clear that this moral account of witnessing is reflected in some of the Committee's twenty-first-century choices, as when Alexievich is lauded for writing "a monument to suffering and courage," Modiano is commended for his "art of memory," or Müller for sketching "the landscape of the dispossessed." But we can also observe that this puts a particular ethical spin on the more general tendency unearthed by Tenngart – whose more dispassionate account is *not* that of an insider but is instead based on a rigorous analysis of the published citations. In fact, what unites the twenty-first-century Nobel citations is something more general than an ethical vocation for literature: it is an emphasis on the examination of a *particular but variable* (and by no means exclusively ethical) kind of reality; what the citations reward is *the exploration and affirmation of particular cultural constellations* – whether those constellations are painful historical episodes (which they are for Espmark) or not. Le Clézio, for instance, is called an "explorer of a humanity *beyond and below* the reigning civilization"; Tranströmer's "translucent images" give us "fresh access to reality"; Tokarczyk represents "the crossing of boundaries as a form of life"; Ernaux is praised for "uncover[ing] the roots, estrangements and collective restraints of personal memory." These authors, in other words, are commended for their exploratory affirmation of the multiplicity of reality, for their formal and imaginative border-crossing. This flexible and plural attitude forms the upbeat, affirmative, multicultural upside of the more melancholy emphasis on testimony that Espmark too exclusively emphasizes.

What emerges in the analysis is that these two faces of the value of factuality – the ethico-epistemological posture of witnessing, the ontological mapping of unexplored realities – to a large extent split apart once they enter the US literary field – and through that field, the rest of the world; the former posture finds a home in New York-centric literary upmarket discourses, while the latter is much more prevalent in the way independent publishers articulate value. In previous research, I have analyzed the conspicuous centrality of the Holocaust and the Second World War in New York-based literary value discourses – which is obvious enough, of course, in the case of a positively Holocaust-obsessed writer like Sebald, but much less so in the cases of less monomaniacal writers like Ferrante and Bolaño, where we yet also see this discourse emerge (Vermeulen). The Holocaust serves as a cognate of literary value because it indexes moral seriousness and also, I believe, a retrospective, memorial atti-

tude. Andrew Piper and Eva Portelance have shown that twenty-first-century literary upmarket fiction is overwhelmingly characterized by a nostalgic attitude and by what they call the “high-cultural sensibility of retrospection” (Piper and Portelance). These markers resonate in, for instance, the designation of Alexievich as “the memory and conscience of the twentieth century” (on the Penguin website), or in the observation (in a blurb on one of her translated works) that Müller’s work is a “testimony” to “what it was like to be alive anywhere in Eastern Europe during the years of communism.” One literary value that Stockholm and New York share, then, is definitely this *morally serious testimonial attitude to reality* – an ethico-epistemological value that bolsters the value of literature.

5 Indie Values

The less melancholic, less past-oriented, more exploratory and more affirmative side of the examination of reality is markedly more prevalent in the world of independent publishing – as the example of Le Clézio already intimated: Parisian sophisticate for Simon & Schuster, cosmopolitan explorer of nonwestern worlds for Godine. Of course, it matters that Simon & Schuster selected an early novel like *The Interrogation*, inspired by Camus’ *The Stranger* and by the *nouveau roman*, rather than, for instance, the later novels *Desert* and *The Prospector* that Godine is publishing: *Interrogation* affords particular values and judgments while it proscribes others – such as the worldliness and cosmopolitanism of Le Clézio’s later work. Boltanski and Thévenot emphasize that judgments, justifications, and the objects to which they pertain are co-constitutive (131–35). Valuation practices always happen in a particular “situation that holds together” and that welcomes tests, litigations, and judgments (136). Translated to the context of world literature, this means that judgments, value discourses, and particular objects – books, texts, authors – are all co-constitutive of world literary space – as when, for instance, a French oeuvre (like that of Le Clézio) compels us to select it as worthy of translation or of winning a literary prize, a preference we justify by comparing it to, for instance, Kafka and Joyce (as the paratexts to *The Interrogation* do), names that in their turn acquired their status as world literary objects through earlier acts of valuation. This comparison to Kafka and Joyce can then, for instance, be challenged by invoking a different justification – for instance, by decrying the oeuvre’s fashionable environmentalism, which makes it fall short of the status of a global masterpiece (as in Parisian mandarin Marc Fumaroli’s public condemnation of Le Clézio’s Nobel Prize). On Boltanski and Thévenot’s terms, what is at stake

in such disputes is neither “direct expression of interests” nor “heterogenous worldviews clashing” (13) but conflicting attempts to constellate judgments, justifications, and literary works in particular ways – to, in their terms “establish associations among things that count” (32).

These constellations look different in different parts of world literary space. If the literary upmarket reception of Le Clézio emphasizes literary seriousness – in the Simon & Schuster edition but also, for instance, in the three republications that Penguin UK rushed into print in 2008, whose covers all fail to mention the translator of the book – the Godine editions, as I noted, all emphasize cultural otherness. This emphasis goes hand in hand with an emphasis on the *translatedness* of the book, a feature that marks independent publishers’ valuation of literature more generally (Vermeulen and Hurkens 442–44): the name of the translators figures prominently; selected blurbs explicitly praise the translation – or indeed the very project of translation, noting that “the English language needs more of” this kind of writing. Indeed, this emphasis on transcultural connection and translation is explicitly identified with the mission of the publisher as such: blurbs emphasize Godine’s mission as a cultural mediator, and peritexts emphasize that the books are “[a]vailable for the first time in English translation.”

What emerges here – and in other examples I have studied – is a conspicuous congruity between publishers’ own position in the US publishing ecosystem (their mission as cultural mediators) and the values ascribed to the oeuvres they mediate. This is a clear instance where literary value can only be understood by investigating *situated* practices of valuation. This shows that some dimensions of literary value – gloom, seriousness, testimony – better fit the literary upmarket niche than others, as we see features such as exploration, plurality, and interculturality migrate to the field of independent publishing. One possible explanation is that, in the conglomerate context in which literary upmarket literature operates, it competes with a broad range of niches (not only films, but all kinds of commodities), and an ascription of moral seriousness might be a more distinctive feature of the literary than, for instance, intercultural connection, which is arguably adequately covered by other assets in conglomerates’ portfolios (in cook books, in magazines, in crime fiction, in comics).

While I have focused on the example of Le Clézio, we can see comparable patterns in, for instance, the value discourse around Herta Müller, where the three books published by a major press (Macmillan) foreground the formal and stylistic qualities of her “terse, hypnotic prose,” ethical qualities such as “honesty” and “authenticity,” as well as the capacity to wrestle poetical beauty from a terrible experience (a trope that also recurs in the discourse around Alex-

ievich). Independent publications of her work instead foreground the quality and the importance of the translation. In the case of Tranströmer, the one major publication presents him as a deeply philosophical writer, while indie publications, such as that of his correspondence with his friend Robert Bly, foreground the work of translation and the worldliness of Tranströmer's work through reference to historical events (rather than spiritual experiences in the case of the major publication); *New Directions* frames *The Great Enigma*, a poetry collection, through ample attention to the translator, a blurb by Teju Cole (a self-styled cosmopolitan intellectual), and comparisons to both Neruda and Rilke (recognizable co-inhabitants of the World Republic of Letters).

Of course, the line between indie values and literary upmarket values is not absolute – Modiano, for instance, combines indie publishers with a paratextual emphasis on testimony, memory, and high seriousness, which echoes the dominant tenor of his reception in literary upmarket institutions such as the *New York Review of Books*. Here, the most likely explanation is that Modiano's novels so overwhelmingly activate these values that there is little point in overwriting them with other ones that wouldn't really find purchase in his work. As Boltanski and Thévenot note, the object – in this case, the literary object – is always a co-constituent of value; judgments can never simply be *imposed* if they want to gain traction in world literary space.

By bringing into focus explicit value discourses and the role of independent Anglophone publishers, this essay has reconfigured world literary space: no longer a binary space where jockeying between center and periphery correlates with a struggle for recognition and prestige, world literary space is more promiscuously peopled by books, human agents, discourses, and values that co-constitute the valences of the literary in the twenty-first century. While the Nobel Prize remains a vital hub for the production of literary value – if not, as Casanova had it, the “objective indicator of the existence of a world literary space” (*Literature as a World* 75) – I suggest that this vitality owes a lot to its partial overlap with the New-York-based literary upmarket niche. Still, the non-monopoly of that niche that is demonstrated by the crucial role of independent publishers signals that that overlap cannot be taken for granted. Recent calls for the diversification of New York-based publishing institutions and more diverse rosters of book reviewers in dominant venues indicate that the overemphasis in the literary upmarket niche on ethical, formal, and memorial seriousness at the expense of the values of diversity might soon begin to change – perhaps it already is. In that shifting context, paper shortages may turn out not to be the major problem in the Nobel Prize's work of generating literary value.

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