

Territorial Trap: Danilo Kiš, Cultural Geography and Geopolitical Imagination

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Abstract

Most attempts to integrate “small”, or “minor”, or “third-world” literatures into a larger whole tend to be inadequate, deductive, and reductionist. Small literatures and their writers may crave recognition and attention, but they are not exactly helped if approached with a set of newly created stereotypes and dubious generalizations, which equate them with the geopolitical situation of their respective nations. This article focuses on Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* as an instance of this attitude towards small literatures. The article uses the example of Danilo Kiš, who figures prominently in Casanova’s book, and argues that his position within his native literary space and the place occupied by this space within world literature are misrepresented in *The World Republic of Letters*. This misrepresentation is not accidental: it necessarily follows from Casanova’s double mapping of this space, which is strongly influenced by geopolitical imagination and popular cultural geography. As long as the international literary space is imagined as overlapping with the space of great consecrating nations, comprising both their national as well as international writers, with the addition of international writers from the periphery “annexed” to them, the world literary map will only reproduce the (geo)political map of the world. The task of constructing a conceptual framework which will do justice to small or third-world literatures and their writers cannot be achieved so long as it is influenced by geopolitical imagination and popular cultural geography, and divides the world literature into the “first-world” and the rest.

At the very end of *The World Republic of Letters*, Pascale Casanova expresses her hope that this book will be a “critical weapon in the service of all deprived and dominated writers on the periphery of the literary world” in their struggle “against the presumptions, the arrogance, and the fiat of critics in the center, who ignore the basic fact of the inequality of access to literary existence”.¹ The reader is led to believe that this can be achieved by situating a writer’s work “with respect to two things: the place occupied by [the writer’s] native literary space within world literature and [the writer’s] own position within this space” (41) and by showing how the laws which govern “this strange and immense republic (...) help illuminate in often radical new ways even the most widely discussed works.” (4) Over the last few decades we have seen many attempts to integrate “small”, or “minor”, or “third-world” literatures into a larger whole, or at least to limit the space occupied by major or first-world literatures, those which have always been the traditional terrain of comparative literature. Although these attempts can be only welcomed by those among us who specialize in literatures of “less frequently taught languages”, as the academic parlance would have it, the manner in which the smallness of these small literatures is discursively constructed very often gives reason to worry: if their descriptions are developed on the basis of one of Kafka’s brief diary entries, or deduced from the geopolitical position of former European colonies and societal efforts to strengthen their post-colonial cultural identities, but without any first-hand insight into the literatures being described themselves, these descriptions run the risk of being inadequate, deductive, and reductionist. This also applies to Casanova’s latest differentiation between “small” and “great” literatures in her article “Combative Literatures”, where she proposes the terms “combative” and “pacified or non-engaged”.² As she does not offer any examples, it is difficult to tell which national literatures she has in mind exactly, but the general guiding principle of classification – that the “combative” ones are all and always only about national definition, history and honour, engaged in political and literary struggles for

recognition, while in the “pacified” ones this is not the dominant ideological outlook, although they too preserve the link with the national space – seems to be devised to help us classify only European literatures of the early nineteenth-century. Since then, even the newest and the smallest among European literatures have *moved*, developed, diversified, and disengaged, although they can still be said to be “small”. Assuming that they have remained forever enchanted by their nations-in-the-making is simply wrong. Small literatures and their writers may crave recognition and attention, but they are not exactly helped if we approach them with a set of newly created stereotypes and dubious generalizations, based on equating them with the geopolitical situation of their respective nations, instead of, as was long the case, simply denying them any recognition or attention.

My aim in this article is twofold. I shall focus on Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* as an instance of this attitude towards small literatures, precisely because Casanova is an author who is without any doubt their champion and cannot be accused of a dismissive attitude towards them. I shall illustrate the difficulties *The World Republic of Letters* encounters dealing with authors from small literatures by using the example of Danilo Kiš, who figures prominently in Casanova’s book as one of the revolutionaries coming from the periphery of the world literary space. I shall argue that his position within his native literary space and the place occupied by this space within world literature are misrepresented in *The World Republic of Letters*. My second aim is to define the discursive constellation which brought about this misrepresentation, and to argue that it is not accidental: it necessarily follows from Casanova’s double mapping of this space, which is strongly influenced by geopolitical imagination and popular cultural geography. In a book which describes the aim of literary evolution as literature’s progressive liberation from political dependency – as its *literarization* – these two influences present a significant obstacle to the author’s explicit aims. The task of constructing a conceptual framework which will do justice to small or third-world literatures and their writers cannot be achieved so long as it is influenced by geopolitical imagination and popular cultural geography, and divides the world literature into the ‘first-world’ and the rest.

1.

“The central hypothesis of this book”, claims Casanova at the very beginning, “is that there exists a ‘literature-world’, a literary universe relatively independent of the everyday world and its political divisions, whose boundaries and operational laws are not reducible to those of ordinary political space.” (xii) The world literary space is autonomous and “endowed with its own laws” (350), and the aesthetic map of the world does not overlap with the political one. Literary space is constituted through a series of dichotomies: autonomous/heteronomous, international/national, modern/archaic, present/past, central/peripheral, and somehow understated but still very important, subjectivist/collectivist. Autonomous, international, modern, present, central and subjectivist are linked together and represent the positive pole of the world literary space, while their opposites stand for the negative one. The evolution of literature has its telos: it slowly progresses towards the positive pole, transforming ever more segments of literary production into literature which is de-nationalized, modern, subjectivist, and autonomous from national political contexts. This series of dichotomies structures both the world literary space and the national spaces within it: as the former has its modern, international, autonomous, subjectivist pole, and its archaic, national, heteronomous and collectivist one, so does every single national literary space.

These literary spaces should not be imagined as territories – some critics do tend to conflate national boundaries with the borders of literary space, warns Casanova (191) – but, perhaps, as being composed of literary works and their authors. While it is not difficult to imagine the international literary space in this manner, the national ones can easily be conflated with nations and states. Prendergast has already noted that, despite Casanova’s own warnings, in *The World Republic of Letters* national literary spaces oftentimes become interchangeable with nations.³ Several examples show that this relapsing into the political map of the world poses serious difficulties for comprehension of Casanova’s intentions. Though it may seem safe to assume that a national literary space is constituted by a national language (though a single language can also constitute a regional literary space, if it is used by several nations), it is more difficult to see how Kafka, who lived in Prague but wrote in German, can belong to the emerging Czech literary space (84). Kafka seems to be trapped by the territory in which he spent his life, the territory of the emerging Czech nation. Writing about authors who lived in exile Casanova often leaves the impression that she considers them to have abandoned their national literary spaces, as they had abandoned their national territories, even though they continued to write in the same language. This indicates that *The World Republic of Letters* puts forward not one, but two parallel constructions of literary space: the first structures the literary world around the international/national axis; the second revolves around the centre/periphery axis and is, in fact, the traditional Westfalian view, which considers only territories – not writers and their works – to be individual actors.⁴

This becomes even more obvious when Casanova introduces the Greenwich meridian. It is a measure of time shared by all international writers, and designates the point of absolute literary present or modernity, proximity to which determines one’s position in the literary world. Although Casanova’s description of literary evolution resembles the developmental theory of socioeconomic and political modernization, hugely popular in the 1950s and 1960s, the similarity is only nominal. While social theorists never fully agreed on the exact content of modernization’s “modernity”, it is generally understood to include industrial economy, scientific technology, liberal-democratic politics, the nuclear family, and a secular worldview. Whether it is taken to be a single, universal and universalizing process, or a process with multiple or alternative incarnations, it can be measured: societies across the globe are closer to the putative telos of modernization’s modernity the higher they are on the scale constructed by the criteria listed above.⁵ The Greenwich meridian, however, does not offer any grounds for comparison – unless autonomy from the national political context and subjectivism are taken as such – simply because literary evolution is only metaphorical. The telos of literary “development” is never reached, as the Greenwich meridian can and does move elsewhere: the modernity marked by it resembles more “contemporaneity” or “fashion” which changes with the seasons, than the “modernity” envisaged by developmental theories. Moreover, the Greenwich meridian is not the centre of this world, as would be expected in the construction of the literary world along the international/national axis. The centre is the place(s) where consecrating authorities, aided by influential media, publishers and literary prizes, decide what is to be considered as absolute literary modernity at a particular moment in time: Paris, but also London, New York, Frankfurt and to a certain extent Barcelona. For example, during the “Faulknerian revolution”, the centre of the world literary space was not Oxford, Mississippi, where Faulkner lived, but Paris, in which Sartre presided over Faulkner’s consecration. This description of the state of affairs seems historically accurate; however, when this leads to the expression “great consecrating nations” (154), namely the powerful, rich states in which the centres are geographically located, it only strengthens the Westfalian view of the world literary space, and its construction along the centre/periphery axis. It undermines Casanova’s claim that the literary universe is independent of the world’s

political divisions. If the centres are determined by the power of the media, publishing conglomerates and literary prizes – which then produce their consecrating authorities – we come dangerously close to the vision of developmental theory: the centres are, in fact, the powerful and rich societies which rank highly in the global political and economic order. The two maps overlap: the global hierarchy, with its centres and peripheries, is mimicked by the literary map. While the Greenwich meridian is clearly non-territorial, the centres and the great consecrating nations are territorial; as the former invites us to imagine the world literary space as not identical to the world political map, the latter tie us to it. The centres are exempt from permanent reconfigurations of the world literary map, as this is where the current position of the Greenwich meridian of literary time is declared. Some national literary spaces, those of the “great consecrating nations”, are assumed to be always autonomous, modern, and international, simply because the work of deciding what is modern and international is carried out within them, even though we also find in them “chunks of the past” of un-modern literature.⁶

The role of the Greenwich meridian is further clarified in Casanova’s “The Literary Greenwich Meridian: Thoughts on the Temporal Forms of Literary Belief”. Here, certain assumptions become more obvious. Most importantly, what cultural geography branded “the territorial trap” – a “process through which reified and naturalized national representations are constructed and reproduced” following in the steps of “the transformations of broader geopolitical spaces and conditions” – here comes to the fore.⁷ “Spaces”, “regions”, “provinces” and the “centre” in this article can be understood only as geographic territories, arranged around the centre/periphery axis. If, however, the literary Greenwich meridian marks the point of absolute modernity in literary time – such as Faulkner’s work at one time – and this point bears all the connotations of centrality, should not the province distant from the centre be understood non-territorially as, for example, the “naturalistic novel”? This would be more a map of the *literary* world. Yet even though Faulkner’s work defines the centre of the literary world, “Faulkner’s America is underdeveloped and primitive” writes Casanova, quoting M. V. Llosa with approval; it is a *literary* “province”.⁸ True, Oxford, Mississippi and many other parts of the world, such as Llosa’s Peru, could be said to be “backward”, and underdeveloped in many respects (socially, economically, etc.) when compared to some other parts of the world – but why should this kind of “backwardness” influence the map of the world literary space, “endowed with its own laws” (351), different from the political and economic divisions of the world? Moreover, why should Faulkner’s America be branded “backward” at the precise moment when Faulkner defines the literary Greenwich meridian? Shouldn’t it rather be recognized as modern, as the centre of this world, if “centres” and “provinces” must necessarily be territorialized? This is an example of the territorial trap: what is the purpose of the literary Greenwich meridian if it does not define the map of the literary world?

This is how *The World Republic of Letters* simultaneously puts forward not one, but two maps of the literary world: one divides it according to the international/national axis into a (non-territorial) international space and a number of national literary spaces, and does not necessarily reproduce the political map of the world. The other, parallel map is structured by the centres/periphery axis, and presumes the existence of “outlying spaces”, “peripheries”, “provinces”, and “destitute literary spaces”, distant from the economic and political centres to various degrees. “Peripheries” or “provinces” of the world literary space are characterized by the most conservative narrative, novelistic and poetical forms, which is a direct result of the heteronomous status of literature in them – serving the national cause, the obligation to help develop a particular national identity – as this social and political function prevents formal experimentation. Writers in “backward” spaces “endlessly reproduce their own norms in a

sort of closed circuit” (106); the most closed literary spaces “are characterized by an absence of translation and, as a result, an ignorance of recent innovations in international literature and of the criteria of literary modernity” (107). In brief, the political dependency of literature in these spaces makes them conservative, ignorant, backward and destitute. Only occasionally do some writers from destitute spaces manage to break free from this closed circuit: “Their own work [...] coincides with the categories of those responsible for consecration in the centres. Like Danilo Kiš, Arno Schmidt, Jorge Luis Borges, and others, they are also translated and recognized in Paris, despite their belonging to destitute literary spaces (in which they remain exceptional figures) very far from the Greenwich meridian.” (208) However surprising it may seem, Schmidt’s Germany and Borges’s Argentina are here categorized as destitute literary spaces; later on, when Nabokov joins them as someone who also came from “those worlds” (281), closed and destitute also become Russia or the USA, or both. Despite long literary traditions and accumulated resources, despite languages read by millions of readers who do not have to rely on translations, even despite Frankfurt’s and New York’s aspiration to become the new centres in which consecrating authorities declare the new Greenwich meridian, Germany, the USA and Russia remain backward and ignorant provinces. It is only thanks to the consecrating authorities that Schmidt, Kiš and Borges are translated and recognized in Paris, which lifts them from obscurity and opens for them the door of the international space. This operation of translation and recognition constitutes the mechanism of *annexation* (154) of peripheral writers by the great consecrating nations: by being annexed by them, these writers join the international literary space, while their national literary spaces remain as destitute as ever – heteronomous, conservative, and ignorant of literary modernity.

There are good reasons to believe that the second map of the literary world, structured around the centres/periphery axis, is not supported by the intentions and arguments of *The World Republic of Letters*. Despite a very sharp distinction between the centrally located spaces and those far removed from them, they have a lot in common. The peripheral or provincial status of some spaces is the consequence of literature’s political heteronomy in all but the central or great nations. Casanova claims that the autonomy of literature – not a complete political disinterestedness and devotion to somehow vaguely defined subjectivity, but literature’s refusal to serve the national cause – is the result of the age, long literary traditions and vast accumulated resources of a particular national literary space. However, French literature, despite its age and resources, lost its autonomy and served the national cause between 1940 and 1944. (194) Could it be that its autonomy, obvious in times when the great consecrating nation is not in any danger, is a consequence of national-political confidence characteristic for “large countries”, and that autonomy disappears when, as between 1940 and 1944, confidence disappears? If so, then French literature is not fully independent of the national-political sphere, but is dependent on the confidence and security granted to it by a state which ranks highly in the global political and economic order.

Moreover, “very different literary temporalities (and therefore aesthetics and theories) may be found in a given national space”. (101) Even within the great consecrating nations “one encounters writers (often academics if not also academicians) whose work lags years behind that of their compatriots; as believers in the eternal nature of conventional aesthetic forms, they go on endlessly reproducing obsolete models”. (101) “Using the instruments of the past”, maintains Casanova, “they produce national texts. There is today an ‘Internationale’ of academics (and academicians) who continue to profess nostalgia for outmoded literary practices in the name of lost literary grandeur: at once centrally situated and immobile, they are ignorant of current inventions in literature; and as members of literary juries and presidents of national writers’ associations, they manufacture and help reproduce [...]

conventional criteria that are out of date in relation to the latest standards of modernity.” (195) It follows that what is the main characteristic of “outlying spaces”, “provinces” and “peripheries” can also be encountered in the centres: “The pronounced academic tendencies that are perpetuated in the oldest literary countries, in France and Great Britain, for example, are proof that autonomy remains very relative even in these supposedly independent worlds, and that the national pole remains powerful.” (195) To make this even more complex, Casanova claims that there is a difference between national writers from small literary nations and national (or nationalist) writers in the most endowed spaces: while the former are always formally and stylistically backward, conservative and ignorant, writers from Québec and Catalonia can at the same time be attached to a requirement of national loyalty and also be the most cosmopolitan and subversive (195), which is a curious exception to the rule that the political dependency of literature makes certain spaces conservative, ignorant, backward and destitute. Casanova does not clarify how national (and nationalist) writers from Québec and Catalonia manage to neutralize the effects produced by political heteronomy elsewhere. In any case, the only measurable criterion of literary modernity – literature’s autonomy from its political context, its “subjectivism” and “non-collectivism” – is thus dispensed with: from this point onwards, one should embrace the idea of multiple or alternative literary modernities, assume that writers in other national spaces can also combine political heteronomy and aesthetic subversion, and abandon the division of literary space in which modern and international equals “Western” and “central”, which translates into a ranking in a global economic and political order.

If the autonomy in centrally located literary spaces is not permanently secured and appears to be the result of the political and economic hierarchy of “these countries” or “large nations”, and if one also encounters national or even nationalistic writers ignorant of literary modernity within them, how is the sharp distinction between the great literary nations and small literatures, rich and destitute spaces, any longer sustainable? The answer seems simple, and at many places in *The World Republic of Letters* Casanova points to this: it is a matter of volume, as there are many more international, autonomous and modernist writers in great consecrating nations, while in destitute places they remain an exception; or, to put it differently, the great consecrating nations have been de-nationalized and modernized to a larger extent. How do we know? Because consecrating authorities from the great consecrating nations tell us so: they have selected and recommended for our consideration only a few writers from other spaces. Do they know everything there is to be known about small literatures? No, consecrating authorities are inherently blind, burdened by deliberate and obvious ignorance, and promote their champions on the basis of huge misunderstandings of what they are trying to do (354), so that “the history of literary celebration amounts to a long series of misunderstandings and misinterpretations”. (154) If this is so, should we not allow for the possibility that there are many more national writers in small literatures who are keenly aware of the Greenwich meridian, write non-nationalist texts and enjoy considerable autonomy, thus fulfilling all the requirements for international writers – even though they are not recognized and translated in Paris? If this is so, and if the handful of writers from small literatures mentioned in *The World Republic of Letters* are not just very rare exceptions, but the tip of the iceberg seen from the centre, with quite a substantial amount of ice underneath, would it not be more correct to abandon the division between great consecrating nations, which by definition inhabit the international literary space – their conservative, national and outmoded academics included – and destitute places, which may have the same or a similar proportion of national and international writers, but can do no more than see their representatives “annexed” (154) by French or British national literary spaces, which emphasises even more their destitute status? Upholding Casanova’s non-territorial division of

the world literary space into an international and many national spaces seems to be the better option: this would allow for imagining the international space as space-of-flows, in which only truly international writers from the great literary nations would find their place, while the conservative national academics would remain where they belong, in their national literary space conceived as space-of-places.⁹ And, conversely, international writers from “destitute places” would not – through the “mechanism of annexation” – cease to belong to their national spaces and join the space of great consecrating nations; they would join the international space-as-flow instead. As long as the international literary space is imagined as overlapping with the space of great consecrating nations, composed of both their national as well as international writers, with the addition of international writers from the periphery “annexed” to them, the world literary map will only reproduce the (geo)political map of the world.

Not only should literature free itself from political dependency: literary theory should do the same. I shall try to explain which political and geopolitical considerations, in my opinion, impose the Westfalian view on the second construction of literary space in Casanova’s book, and why it should be abandoned as a territorial trap. I shall use as an example the case of Danilo Kiš, one of Casanova’s revolutionaries who figures prominently in her book, and who put forward the idea of Paris as the very centre of the world literary space even before *The World Republic of Letters*.¹⁰ We shall see that instead of serving as a proof and a witness, Kiš’s case and everything he had to say about the international space and destitute places in fact undermines Casanova’s division. If Kiš was to be trusted when he celebrated Paris as the absolute centre of the literary world, perhaps he could also be trusted when he presented ‘destitute places’ differently from Casanova?

2.

Assessing Kiš’s situation in the 1970s, Casanova maintains: “The only way [...] for a Yugoslav around 1970 (such as Danilo Kiš) to refuse submission to the aesthetic conditions imposed by Moscow [...] was to turn toward Paris”. (95) In the 1960s and 1970s, however, no aesthetic conditions were imposed by Moscow on Yugoslavia. After Stalin’s break with Tito in 1948 Yugoslavia defined its political and cultural identity not by following Moscow, but in opposition to it. American literary historian Thomas Eekman sums it up in the following manner: “Of all the immense consequences of the break between Tito and Stalin, the freeing of the arts was certainly one of the most significant and felicitous. It was an enormous relief when it became increasingly clear, between 1949 and 1954, that the Party (...) would no longer enforce political-ideological directives upon literature and other art forms”.¹¹ Although in the years immediately following the war the Communist Party of Yugoslavia persisted in restating Socialist Realist demands, from the early 1950s cultural production was fully liberalized. The brief period of Socialist Realism did not leave any significant traces: there were too few writers in the Party, and too few books published in a country devastated by the war. The break with Moscow and the Party’s decision to reassess all aspects of its cultural policy had only beneficial effects: “Understandably, this change unleashed a wide range of hitherto impeded creative forces,” maintains Eekman, “by and large, a crystallization into two opposing camps ensued: those who stuck to the time-honored methods of realism, on the one hand, and the ‘modernists’ of all sorts and conditions, seekers of the new and original ways of expression, on the other. The latter followed the developments in western European and American literature and to some extent embodied pre-war expressionist and surrealist tendencies. [...] Post-war French, English, American literary

critics and scholars were studied. A general enthusiasm and eagerness to go beyond the national borders could be felt, as a reaction to the long seclusion and separation from Western thought. Gradually, a literary life and a literature of considerable variety and richness developed: a poetry of high sophistication, on a level with international poetic trends, an abundant harvest of novels and short stories written on the most diverse themes, using new styles and techniques, and, finally, an alert, intelligent, internationally oriented literary criticism".¹² Neither Kiš nor any other Yugoslav writer from the early 1950s onwards had to refuse submission to aesthetic conditions imposed by Moscow, because there were none.

Casanova, however, does not present Kiš merely as an aesthetic dissident, but as a political one as well: "It was in Paris that Kiš chose exile in order to escape censorship and official harassment in Belgrade during the 1970s". (129) This is more the stereotype of an East European writer in the West than the reality of Kiš's position. In the 1970s books were not censored in Yugoslavia, providing they did not explicitly question the Party's (and especially Tito's) right to rule the country, and if they did, Party officials were more likely to criticise them in their forums and in the media than resort to bans. Here is Eekman again: "Generally speaking, freedom of artistic expression was great (as long as certain areas were not touched), and the Yugoslav poets and writers could in most cases freely publish their work, provided they kept to standards of decency prevailing in most countries".¹³ It is less clear what Casanova's "official harassment" refers to. If it refers to the polemic which followed the publication of *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, harassment it certainly was, but hardly "official". Not only did the Party not interfere, but its official journal, *Komunist*, published a laudatory review of *A Tomb*; when one of Kiš's opponents took him to court for libel, the court dismissed the charges and ruled in Kiš's favour. While the polemics lasted, one of Kiš's staunchest supporters, Predrag Matvejević, accurately defined their nature: it was Kiš's "clash with a clan, whose activities had been condemned in both literary and political circles"¹⁴, and not with the Party or the state. It was an organized attack on a successful, much-liked and highly-praised writer – in 1973 Kiš had received the NIN award for the best novel in Serbo-Croat – by a very heterogeneous group, linked by quite mundane interests. In addition to Dragoljub Golubović, a journalist, and Branimir Šćepanović, a writer, there were also Dragan Jeremić, a professor of aesthetics, literary critic and editor who sat on many juries for literary awards, and incidentally competed for an award with Kiš when the polemics started; Miodrag Bulatović, a writer whose work was translated into more than twenty languages and sold in huge print-runs, certainly not a conservative realist, and himself always in an uneasy relationship with the Party; and Jean Descat from Bordeaux, a French professor of Slavonic literature. On the opposite, much more numerous side, were practically all significant Belgrade literary critics and writers, and also several from Zagreb and Ljubljana. Before the polemics were over, Kiš received two more major literary awards ("Ivan Goran Kovačić" in 1977, and "Železara Sisak" in 1979), and subsequently not only the most prestigious Yugoslav literary awards ("Andrić award" in 1984, and "Skender Kulenović" in 1986) but also the great "state" awards: "Sedmojulska nagrada" in 1987, and in 1988 – the year he was elected member of Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts – the "AVNOJ award". Kiš himself never claimed to be an East European dissident in political exile in the West. On the contrary, he always maintained the opposite. "*Do you go to Yugoslavia often?*", an interviewer asked him in 1984, and he replied: "I go there regularly".¹⁵ He went there every three months, kept a flat in Belgrade, and practically lived between Belgrade and Paris. "As I have never broken the connection with Yugoslavia, and as I travel frequently, these three-month periods cannot cause nostalgia, they can only cause a healthy distance in me", said Kiš in 1986.¹⁶ However, every cliché dies hard: he knew that an East European or Soviet writer living in Western Europe was expected to be an exile, and he

defended himself as much as he could: “*Aren’t you persona non grata there?*”, he was asked in the same year, and replied: “[There are] misunderstandings rather than problems, and no, I visit Yugoslavia two or three times a year [...]” “*Are you read more in France than in Yugoslavia?*”, “No, my widest audience is in Yugoslavia [...]. I might add that I have received a number of literary prizes in Yugoslavia.” “*Why did you leave Yugoslavia? Isn’t Paris a sort of exile?*”, “Let me put it laconically: it’s a Joyce-like exile, a self-imposed exile”.¹⁷ “I have no problems with my country, many like and respect me there”.¹⁸ “I have to underline that I am not a dissident, and I was not forced to become one”.¹⁹ Why did he leave, then? “Sharing my life between Belgrade and Paris may be a consequence of my having difficulty settling in one place”.²⁰ “I simply wanted to live in another country, as so many writers before me”.²¹ And why Paris of all places? Because French was his best foreign language: “My generation stands at the end of a long line of Yugoslav intellectuals in France. It has to do with language. Nowadays everybody speaks English, but in my day one had to study French at school. For us, there was only Paris, Paris”.²² “From the moment I began to desire to ‘see the world’, it could have been only Paris for me. I followed the long tradition of Yugoslav painters and writers, both Serbian and Croatian, of pilgrimage to Paris.”²³ There were neither aesthetic conditions imposed by Moscow, nor a dissident who escapes censorship and official harassment. However, in *The World Republic of Letters*, Kiš must be an exile not only because the cliché of East European and Soviet writers demands it, but also because as an exile he becomes exterritorial, outside of the borders of his national literary space. Thus he becomes available for “annexation”.

Was there, nevertheless, some sort of aesthetic dictate in Yugoslavia, if not imposed by Moscow, then self-imposed by Yugoslav culture? Casanova maintains that there was: “[T]rapped in a country whose literature was exclusively concerned with national and political questions, and in an intellectual milieu that was (as he put it) ‘ignorant’ because ‘provincial’, he nonetheless managed to revise the rules of the game and forge a new fictional aesthetic by arming himself with the results of the literary revolutions that had occurred previously on the international level. [...] The accusation of plagiarism brought against him was credible only in a closed literary world that had not yet been touched by any of the great literary, aesthetic, and formal revolutions of the twentieth century. Only in a world that was unaware of ‘Western’ literary innovations (an epithet that invariably carried a pejorative sense in Belgrade) could a text composed with the whole of international fictional modernity in mind be seen as a simple copy of some other work. The very accusation of plagiarism was proof, in fact, of the aesthetic backwardness of Serbia, a land located far in the literary past in relation to the Greenwich meridian. [...] a literary space so completely closed in on itself that it knows only how to reproduce ad infinitum the neorealist conception of the novel.” (112-114) Eekman’s paragraph cited previously paints a different picture, but for our purposes it is more important to examine if this is how Kiš saw his own artistic and intellectual milieu in a city in which in the 1970s lived Nobel Prize winner Ivo Andrić, where Dušan Makavejev made his films, where the Belgrade International Theater Festival (BITEF) quickly gained the reputation of Europe’s “most significant festival of avant-garde theatre”²⁴, where John Cage’s “Canfield”, previously ridiculed in Cologne, won the first prize at a festival, and where Marina Abramović gave her first performances. Did he really perceive it as “ignorant” and “provincial”, as a literary world untouched by great revolutions, unaware of “Western” literary innovations, locked in literary past and neorealism? Let it be just briefly noted that in this paragraph Casanova substituted for Yugoslavia an aesthetically backward Serbia; we shall return to this shortly. While Yugoslavia lasted, the Serbo-Croat speaking space functioned as one literary space, connected by the infrastructure of publishers, literary awards and criticism, and Kiš himself certainly considered it as such.

Nowhere in *The Anatomy Lesson*, including the French edition which Casanova cited, had Kiš called his intellectual milieu “ignorant” and “provincial”.²⁵ Referring to what Casanova dismissed as “a closed literary world that had not yet been touched by any of the great literary, aesthetic, and formal revolutions of the twentieth century”, Kiš maintained in 1965: “We have a writer better than all contemporary French writers, *y compris* Sartre: it is Krleža. [...] I am convinced that our contemporary literature, particularly poetry, stands above French literature.”²⁶ He repeated countless times that Andrić, Krleža and Crnjanski were his literary models and ancestors: “By bringing up names of Yugoslav writers, I wish to inform the Western reader I’m not without roots, I’m not an orphan. [...] and if I keep bringing up these three, it’s not only because I believe them to be great European writers but also because, unlike many French writers, they took literature seriously and experienced it tragically”.²⁷ They, claimed Kiš, “deserve world fame as great writers. They are equals to contemporary European writers”, adding to these three names also younger ones, such as Dragoslav Mihailović and Mirko Kovač.²⁸ Moreover, he not only believed that the best Yugoslav writers could be compared to the best European ones, he had a good opinion of the earlier tradition as well. When asked to which of his two family traditions he felt more attached, he replied: “On one side, the epic tradition of Serbian heroic poems, which my mother passed on me together with its harsh Balkan eloquence and on the other the literature of Central Europe, and decadent and Baroque Hungarian poetry”.²⁹

Kiš, with many other Yugoslavs, was well aware of what was going on in the international literary space, and his positive judgement was not passed on the spur of a moment. He held a degree in “world literature”, as the department of comparative literature of the University of Belgrade was colloquially known: “I studied comparative literature at the University of Belgrade, and this involved studying the great works of world literature (in the original or translations, depending on the languages you knew), including Japanese and Chinese, Greek and Roman, French, American, and, of course, Russian works. We read literary theory a lot, and some of it stayed with me”.³⁰ By the time he enrolled in 1954, plenty of ‘Western’ literary innovations which Casanova claims Belgrade was isolated from were available in translation. To limit the list only to the great literary, aesthetic and formal revolutionaries from *The World Republic of Letters*, Ibsen was translated and staged at the beginning of the twentieth century; immediately after the First World War he was joined by Strindberg; Pirandello’s collected works appeared at that time. Thomas Mann was translated from the early 1920s. The great canonical modernists appeared in translation in the early 1950s: Joyce, Proust, Kafka, Faulkner, Rilke, and Valery were translated between 1952 and 1957, preceded by Virginia Woolf in 1946. Post-Second World War European and American writers were translated within several years of the original publications: *Waiting for Godot* was staged in Belgrade in 1956, three years after its premiere in Paris, and Beckett’s prose was regularly translated from the late 1950s. Earlier literary and aesthetic revolutions were not only represented in translation, but had their local proponents as well: Serbian Surrealism and Expressionism between the world wars were contemporaries of their French and German counterparts; between 1921 and 1926 Ljubomir Micić edited *Zenit*, nowadays recognized as one of the more important European avant-garde literary journals. The “first modernism” between the world wars, as Serbian literary history calls it, was followed by the “second modernism” in the 1950s, when a number of pre-war modernists resumed writing and were joined by a new generation, with Vasko Popa, Jovan Hristić, Miodrag Pavlović, Ivan V. Lalić, Branko Miljković, Oskar Davičo, Radomir Konstantinović, Aleksandar Popović and Miodrag Bulatović – one of Kiš’s opponents in the polemics – as the most prominent. Kiš’s generation soon strengthened their ranks: Mirko Kovač, Bora Ćosić, Borislav Pekić, and many others. These two decades, the 1960s and 1970s, which Casanova considers to

represent “the aesthetic backwardness of Serbia, a land located far in the literary past”, Eekman in his history of Yugoslav literature presents in a chapter entitled “Modern expression transcends tradition”. There is a significant *lapsus calamis* in the quote from *The World Republic of Letters* I am commenting on here: Casanova does not say “only in a world that was unaware of *international* literary innovations [...] could a text composed with the whole of international fictional modernity in mind be seen as simple copy of some other work”, which would correspond to her first division of the literary world, constructed around the international/national axis, into an international and many national spaces. Instead of “international”, she writes “Western”. Thus the international pole of the world literature, characterized by autonomy, modernity, present and subjectivity, becomes once more territorially and geographically located.

However, Kiš –and his intellectual milieu – was familiar not only with “Western” literary innovations: his horizon included “Eastern” ones as well. He admired Mikhail Sholokhov³¹, considered himself to be “in some way a follower of Russian literature, of Russian realism”³² and even more of twentieth-century Russian modernism. This was not always easy to explain to “Western” interviewers. In 1986 Kiš was interviewed for *Formations*, and when asked who the models for the “intellectual lyrism” of *Hourglass* were, he answered laconically, perhaps assuming that mentioning their names would not raise much interest: “I had in mind some Russian writers.” The interviewer insists: “Certainly Pasternak?” Everybody knows Pasternak as the opponent of the Soviet regime who under political pressure declined the Nobel Prize; not really Pasternak, answers Kiš, but “Babel, Pilnyak and Olesha”.³³ The names of three significant Russian modernists who, however, were not political dissidents, proved a dead end, and the interviewer quickly moved on to another topic.

Kiš frequently mentioned Andrić, Krleža, Crnjanski, Babel and Pilnyak as his privileged interlocutors, sometimes also adding Rabelais, Borges, Joyce and Nabokov. This does not mean, however, that he was uncritical of literature written in his own language. On the contrary, in 1973 he said: “Our poetry does not lag behind what is on offer on the world market of poetry. (...) As for prose writing, I dare say that we in general experience the same as the rest of the world: crisis. To be precise, we still write poor prose, anachronistic in expression and themes, reliant on the nineteenth-century tradition, faint-hearted when it comes to experimentation, regional and local, in which this *couleur locale* most often serves the purpose of safeguarding the national identity as the identity of this prose. To avoid every misunderstanding: I am talking about general currents, not about individual breakthroughs. As for the world, in our prose they still, more or less, look for excess, *couleur locale* or political pamphlet, the surrogates of tourism and politics.”³⁴ Literary history knows this as “the prose of the new style” or “the prose of reality”, which appeared in the late 1960s and early 1970s as a group of younger writers’ reaction to the modernist prose which dominated Serbian literature at the time, and whom Kiš perceived as his principal opponents on the literary scene.³⁵ In a manner well described by Russian Formalists, they reacted to the modernism of the previous generation by writing simple, non-experimental *degré zéro* prose, focused on the lives of outcasts lost in the process of social modernization, which indeed contributed to the impression of nineteenth-century realism. Their appearance, however, was not a sign that there was no modernism in Serbian prose, but that – at least in their view – there was too much of it. Such anachronistic fiction is, as Casanova maintains, still written in the centres of the world literary space as well as at its periphery; Kiš claims the same, as he sees it as the general current of the world as well as of Yugoslav literature, a background for individual achievements. If these background currents determine the identity of a national literary space, then Casanova’s diagnosis is accurate, Yugoslav – or Serbian, as Casanova maintains – literature was aesthetically backward indeed, “a land located far in the literary

past in relation to the Greenwich meridian” and “a literary space so completely closed in on itself that it knows only how to reproduce ad infinitum the neorealist conception of the novel”. However, then all literary spaces, including the metropolitan ones, are so; if, on the contrary, literary time is measured by individual breakthroughs, and their number relative to the total output, then the identity of Yugoslav prose in the 1970s should be determined by Danilo Kiš and – if Kiš’s judgement counts at all – by Andrić, Krleža, Crnjanski, Mihailović and Kovač, and one would need to revise Casanova’s placement of it relative to the Greenwich meridian.

While one does not necessarily need to know every line from every interview when discussing an author’s views, not misrepresenting these views is important. Casanova quotes from Kiš’s brief article “*Homo Poeticus, Regardless*” the following sentence: “The triumph of engagement, of commitment – to which, we must admit, we adhere only too often and which stipulates that literature which is not literature – shows to what extent politics has penetrated the very pores of our beings, flooded life like a swamp, made man unidimensional and poor in spirit, to what extent poetry has been defeated, to what extent it has become the privilege of the rich and ‘decadent’ who can afford the luxury of literature, while the rest of us...”. (383) Casanova offers an interpretation in which Kiš’s condemnation of reducing literature to politics is directed against Kiš’s “national literary aesthetics” and Soviet political influence: “Thus he describes the dominance of a national literary aesthetic imposed in the former Yugoslavia through the combined influence of native literary tradition, the political regime and national history, and the political influence of the Soviet Union.” (198) Everything in this interpretation is dubious. The sentence Casanova quotes is, in fact, directed not against the “national literary aesthetics”, but against the Sartrean concept of *littérature engagée*. This was not the first time that Kiš voiced his opposition to the literature of commitment, an element of the *international* literary aesthetics created in France in the mid-twentieth century.³⁶ Kiš’s “triumph of engagement, of commitment – to which, we must admit, we adhere only too often” – very clearly points in this direction. Most readers would immediately associate “engagement” and “commitment” with *littérature engagée* and Sartre. However, it seems that Kiš’s “we” redirected the process of associations toward Kiš’s “isolated country” and transformed his opposition to *littérature engagé* into opposition to his national literary aesthetics. Why was it so difficult to assume that by “we” Kiš referred to a global or at least European readership, and not solely Yugoslav readers? Why wouldn’t a writer from an “isolated country” be presumed to be able to refer to something France contributed to the stock of international aesthetics? This only proves how persistent is the conviction that, as we know so little about them, they must know equally little about us. This stereotype was also a target of Kiš’s frequent complaints: “*What does it mean to you to be a Yugoslav writer in Paris?*”, Janine Matillon asked him in an interview for *La Quinzaine littéraire* in 1980, to which he replied: “Everything that happens here, in culture, politics, in literature, is a part of my world, part of my culture. I am familiar with all the names of French culture; I am engaged in a quotidian abstract dialogue with them. But they do not share *my* world. There are no common references if we are to speak about our culture and its key themes and problems. Their themes are also mine; mine are never theirs.”³⁷ And the other way around: it is never assumed that they could criticise us. When they read Western authors, this is only in order to pull their cultures out from the state of backwardness, and if they ever raise a voice of criticism, they must be referring to their destitute spaces.

In fact, Kiš’s ironical article “*Homo Poeticus, Regardless*” is double-edged: on the one hand, he derides “Western” expectations that every East European author must be *homo politicus*, while every author from the western part of the continent is allowed to be *homo poeticus*. Casanova also explicitly upholds this stereotype at many places in *The World Republic of*

Letters: “the subjective” is “the domain reserved for literature in large countries” while politicization and the collective are for the rest. (201) Kiš could not disagree more: “Europe sees us – the writers from the ‘other Europe’ – as people who should always be involved in politics and write only about politics. They – the Americans, the Europeans, etc. – have the right to make use of all themes, including love, while they reserve only political questions for us.”³⁸ East European writers are expected to “witness” the horrors of totalitarianism, to be politically *engagé*, to oppose their political regimes, and thus earn fame like Pasternak, as opposed to the obscurity of aesthetically modern, but politically unattractive Babel and Pilnyak. “We civilized Europeans” writes Kiš, impersonating a “Western” author in his “*Homo Poeticus, Regardless*”, “pure in heart and mind, we’ll describe the beauty of our sunsets and our childhoods (like St.-John Perse), we’ll write poems about love and whatnot. Why don’t they stick to their politico-exotico-Communistski problems and leave the real literature – the maid of all work, the sweet servant of our childhood – to us. If they start writing about what we write about – poetry, suffering, history, mythology, the human condition, ‘the timeworn trinkets of plangent vanity’ – we won’t be interested. Then they’ll be like us, with their Andrić and their Krleža (now how do you pronounce that one?) and Miloš Crnjanski (another krkr) and Dragoslav Mihajlović and so on, all of whom we can easily do without. So *Homo politicus* is for us Yugoslavs while they have the rest, that is, every other facet of that wonderful, multifaceted crystal, the crystal known as *Homo poeticus*, the poetic animal that suffers from love as well as mortality, from metaphysics as well as politics’.³⁹ On the other hand, Kiš adds that Yugoslavs are not innocent either, as they “failed to resist the temptation of exporting [their] minor [...] problems of nationalism and chauvinism and shouting from the rooftops that [they] are not primarily Yugoslavs, no, we are Serbs and Croats, Slovenes and Macedonians or whatever”.⁴⁰ However, it is not their – non-existent – national literary aesthetics that Kiš objects to: it is their eagerness to satisfy the demand, to meet “Western” expectations, to gain recognition, translation and fame. This brief essay was written as a response to the question (ubiquitous in small literatures) “what to do to make them know about us?” Here is what Kiš considers most important: “And most importantly, let’s not be taken in by the time-worn myth that we Yugoslavs and other Hungarians should give up literature and stick to entertaining the whole world with politico-exotico-Communistski themes, give up trying to be anything but *homines politici* [...]. No, literature and poetry [...] are equally for us and you, our barbaric dreams and yours, our myths and yours, our loves and yours, our memories and yours, our day-to-day existence and yours, our unhappy childhood and yours (which may just have been unhappy, too), our obsession with death and yours (identical, I hope)”.⁴¹ Instead of describing the national literary aesthetics of Yugoslavs, as Casanova reads this essay, Kiš is actually urging his Yugoslav fellow-writers not to be misled that satisfying the demand and meeting the “Western” expectations of East European writers — “reducing human beings to a single dimension, the dimension of *zoon politicon*, a political animal”⁴² – would bring them anything good. Instead of seeing themselves through the gaze of the other and conforming to a stereotype, they should remember that they also “belong to the family of European nations, and have as much right as they or more – given our Judeo-Christian, Byzantine and Ottoman tradition – to membership in the European cultural community”⁴³, and should continue to write not political commentaries for “Western” readers, but literature, as Andrić, Krleža, Crnjanski, and Mihajlović have, and thus be *homines poetici* “*regardless*” of what is expected of them.

Moreover, “the political influence of the Soviet Union”, was not relevant in the context of Kiš’s national literature. Exposing Stalinist ideology and practice was not frowned upon in Tito’s Yugoslavia: on the contrary, it was welcomed, as it *ex post facto* strengthened the

position of the Communist Party of Yugoslavia after 1948. To be sure, the Soviets put some pressure on Yugoslavs when it came to “anti-Soviet propaganda”. Soviet diplomats routinely objected to publication of Soviet dissident works, and sometimes – as was the case with Solzhenitsyn’s *The Gulag Archipelago*, published only in 1988 in Serbo-Croat – succeeded in delaying publication.⁴⁴ However, Karlo Štajner’s *7000 days in Siberia*, the memoir of a Yugoslav Gulag inmate in which Kiš found many details which would later enter *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, was published in 1971 with Tito’s explicit approval, and won one of the most prestigious Yugoslav literary awards.⁴⁵ As Štajner was a Yugoslav, Soviet objections did not apply to him. When it was published, *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* attracted no attention from the Soviets, nor politically shocked anyone in Yugoslavia. And it seems that shocking Yugoslavs was not Kiš’s aim either. When asked “*What prompted you to write A Tomb?*”, Kiš replied: “In the 1970s I lived in Bordeaux, where I taught at the University. I often had deep disagreements in political debates. I was truly scared by the monolithic ignorance and ideological fanaticism of the young. Just a mere mention of the Soviet prison camps was sacrilege. The only arguments capable of somehow shattering their convictions were moving stories.”⁴⁶ Not only Bordeaux students were ideologically fanatical: “It mustn’t be forgotten that even though Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* appeared about then, leftist intellectuals not only refused to accept the horrible facts of our age – but refused even to read it, considering it an act of ideological sabotage and right-wing conspiracy. Since it was impossible to discuss anything on the level of general ideas with them – they had a priori, aggressive attitudes about everything – I felt obliged to formalize my arguments in the form of anecdotes and stories based on Solzhenitsyn himself and Karlo Štajner, Eugenia Ginzburg, Nadezhda Mandelstam, Roy Medvedev, etc. These anecdotes were still the only form of conversation they were ready to accept or, rather, listen to. Because, when it came to ideology, sociology, or politics, they brooked no opposition, those alleged intellectuals; they were extremely intolerant and saw everything in Manichaeian terms: the East was heaven, the West was hell – exploitation, consumerism, etc., etc. [...] It was the general tone of the French intelligentsia, in Paris as well as in Bordeaux; it was the general tendency – [...] – of the Western intelligentsia as a whole.”⁴⁷ It transpires that while writing *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, Kiš had in mind not “the political influence of the Soviet Union” on Yugoslavia or the nature of Yugoslavia’s regime, but the Soviet Union’s appeal to French or Western intellectuals, the “fanaticism, blindness, and arrogance”⁴⁸ of metropolitan intellectuals: ‘Thanks to the French left I became sickened by politics’.⁴⁹

And lastly, one more issue: nationalism. “The harsh critique of nationalism that opens *The Anatomy Lesson* not only is political in the narrow sense of the term; it is also a way of politically defending a position of literary autonomy, a refusal to recognize the aesthetic canons imposed by the nationalist mind”, Casanova maintains. (114) The critique of nationalism on several pages at the beginning of *The Anatomy Lesson*, can easily leave the impression that the whole polemic about *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* was motivated by a nationalist attack on Kiš, and that with this critique Kiš fought the aesthetic canons imposed by the nationalist mind. On closer inspection, however, this impression disappears. These pages first appeared in an interview Kiš gave to Boro Krivokapić in 1973.⁵⁰ The late 1960s and early 1970s was a time of nationalist mass movements in Croatia and Kosovo; also, at that time several nationalist-minded Slovene and Macedonian communist leaders were made to leave office.⁵¹ Krivokapić also edited *Treba li spaliti Kiša* (Should Kiš be Burnt?), a collection of all the articles which appeared during the long debate about *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, of which *The Anatomy Lesson* was but a part. Chronological reading clearly shows how nationalism entered this literary debate, and how these pages from Kiš’s 1973 interview ended up in *The Anatomy Lesson*. In the article which opened the polemics,

published in Zagreb in 1976, Dragoljub Golubović used the phrase “*da se Vlasi ne sete*”, “so that Vlachs can’t see through the trick”, which means “to draw a red herring across the trail”.⁵² “Vlach” is, among other things, a derogatory name used by nationalist Croats for Serbs. In his first reply to Golubović, Kiš ironically called Golubović “a clever Vlach”⁵³: read in context, the ironic meaning was “and you see through my tricks”. As people engaged in bitter polemics often do, in his next contribution Golubović ignored the context and implied that by calling him a Vlach, Kiš revealed his anti-Serbian chauvinism.⁵⁴ All this quickly disappeared from the following contributions, but it must have lingered on in the oral, gossipy component of the polemics, as Kiš considered it important enough to be addressed in *The Anatomy Lesson*, in which a part from his 1973 interview on nationalism is introduced with the sentence “he calls us Vlachs!”⁵⁵ At the end of this section, Kiš clearly points to this: “And I [...] do not believe that with this commentary, this confession, I shall correct their arbitrary interpretation, this malevolent reading [...]”⁵⁶ The arbitrary interpretation and malevolent reading refer to Golubović’s transfer of “clever Vlach” from the context of an everyday colloquial expression to the context of nationalism – and not to Kiš’s work in general, as the somehow inapt English translation suggests.⁵⁷ By incorporating parts of his 1973 interview on nationalism in *The Anatomy Lesson*, Kiš was pre-empting accusations that he was a nationalist, and not accusing his opponents of nationalism. There is no evidence that nationalism, whether that of Kiš or his opponents had any role in this affair.

Casanova further claims that “[s]ocialist realism therefore served to reinforce Russian domination of the Serbs: ‘Just as St.Petersburg was a “window on the world” for Russians at the time of Peter the Great (...) so Russia is Serb culture’s “window on the world”, one where two myths converge: pan-Slavism (Orthodoxy) and revolution, Dostoevsky and the Comintern.’” (198-199) The inserted quote comes from Kiš’s “Variations on Central European Themes” and was in need of Casanova’s clarification: “The Serb’s avowed submission to Moscow encouraged the Croats to distinguish themselves by choosing Paris as their intellectual pole”. (383) This claim, for which no evidence is offered, explains why Casanova’s book alternates Yugoslavia, mentioned in neutral contexts, with Serbia, substituting the former when the context is negative, and why Casanova believes that “Western” was “an epithet that invariably carried a pejorative sense in Belgrade” (114) – again, without any supporting evidence. This sounds less as a well-informed judgement of a scholar, and more like a journalistic cliché frequent in the French media during the Yugoslav wars in the 1990s, when this book was written.⁵⁸ In “Variations on Central European Themes” Kiš did indeed repeat the myth about “special relations” between Serbs and Russians, created for propaganda purposes in Austria-Hungary after 1904, when the Kingdom of Serbia changed its foreign policy and began relying more on France and Russia instead of on its northern neighbour, a myth which was revived in the 1990s by European and American media. This myth did not withstand the scrutiny of historians: throughout the 19th century Serbia politically and economically relied on Austria-Hungary – to the point of being its satellite – and intellectually on Austro-Hungarian Serbs who studied at central European universities. If there had been more time for research, Casanova would have certainly encountered the historical fact of Serbian francophonie⁵⁹, but unfortunately *The World Republic of Letters* went into print burdened with “popular geopolitics”, the assembly of images and representations embedded in popular culture and mass media⁶⁰, produced and circulated in order to tell the public on which side of the war “we” are.

The place occupied by Danilo Kiš's native literary space within world literature and his own position within this space are in fact markedly different from those described in *The World Republic of Letters*, and the book obfuscates instead of illuminating. There were no aesthetic conditions imposed by Moscow, nor Soviet political influence; Kiš did not choose exile in order to escape censorship and official harassment; he did not write his books in a closed literary world untouched by any of the great literary, aesthetic and formal innovations; he did not oppose the demand of the national literary aesthetics to serve a national-political purpose with his literature, because such a demand did not exist. He read, like all other Yugoslavs, both "Western" and "Eastern" writers; he went to live between Paris and Belgrade out of a mixture of private reasons (among the latter, his divorce and a new relationship with a French woman were not the least important), and a wish to "be in touch with the wellsprings of European culture".⁶¹ He admired many Yugoslav writers, both older and his contemporaries; he even maintained that in some respects Yugoslav contemporary literature ranked higher than that of France; and he was annoyed by the usual "Western" stereotype of East European writers – precisely the one which *The World Republic of Letters* forces him into. The plot of Casanova's story – a great writer oppressed by political influence and aesthetic demands from Moscow, living in a sea of intellectual poverty, ignorance and isolation, forced to serve a national-political purpose with his writing, and eventually rescued by "Western" mechanisms of annexation, settled in Paris and in French literature, and thus preserved for the international literary space – cannot be supported by evidence.

However, *The World Republic of Letters* is an admirable book which gives an advance warning that misreading and misrepresentation are not exceptions, but the rules which govern the work of consecrating authorities: "The great consecrating nations reduce foreign works of literature to their own categories of perception, which they mistake for universal norms, while neglecting all the elements of historical, cultural, political, and especially literary context that make it possible to properly and fully appreciate such works. [...] As a result, the history of literary celebration amounts to a long series of misunderstandings and misinterpretations that have their roots in the ethnocentrism of the dominant authorities (notably those in Paris) and in the mechanism of annexation (by which works from outlying areas are subordinated to the aesthetic, historical, political and formal categories of the centre)." (154) The dominant authorities lift some peripheral authors out of obscurity, but this is achieved "only at the cost of seeing their work appropriated by the literary establishment for its own purposes". (163) For the universal recognition achieved only at the price of huge misunderstanding, Casanova blames "the inherent blindness of the consecrating authorities", the "deliberate dehistoricization" they practice, and "an equally deliberate and obvious ignorance". (354) In her book, which partakes in the ritual of Kiš's consecration and universal recognition, Casanova does the same with Danilo Kiš.

It is not surprising that such a book would defend itself in advance against this kind of criticism. Casanova tells of the ire of an Irish critic named Ernest Boyd, who attacked Valery Larboud, the principal consecrating judge who introduced Joyce to the French and later international audience, thus lifting the Irish writer out of obscurity. Boyd accused Larboud of complete ignorance of the great Anglo-Irish writers and of Irish literature in general, claiming that he misunderstood the national literary revival in Ireland, and "interpret[ed] his remarks as an attack on the identity of Irish literature and its distinctive place among the literatures of the English-speaking world". (154-155) In Casanova's view, this amounts to "the national view of literature" and a "declaration of national interest" (155), allegedly opposed to the purely literary interests of consecrating authorities which, although suffering from inherent blindness and deliberate ignorance, nevertheless perform an admirable task of ennobling, internationalizing and universalizing great works of art. This warning is more than enough to

put off everyone from criticising her treatment of peripheral authors and literary revolutionaries: who would want, in the field of comparative literature, to expose themselves to the accusation of defending the national view of literature and of declaring a national interest?

Things are slightly more complex, however. Presenting such criticism as “the battle between the national view of literature and the dehistoricizing impulse” (155), Casanova somewhat simplifies the issue. The national view of literature, however legitimate it may be, loses its appeal as soon as we begin thinking about literature on a global scale. Writers who cannot withstand being read outside of their national contexts can be safely left undisturbed in their national literary spaces. In this respect, claiming that authors can be understood only in their national literary context does amount to a declaration of national interest, ubiquitous in histories of national literatures and in their ideologies, and structurally opposed to the claims and intentions of comparative literature. It is indeed ethnocentric, and not much different from the ethnocentrism of consecrating authorities. But there is a world of difference between de-historicizing and de-nationalizing a writer’s work, relieving it of its national literary context, and *erroneous* historicization and nationalization – putting it in a historical and national literary context which is not its own. Objections to it need not be rejected as declarations of national interest; they can be declarations of professional interest just as well.

Casanova is a consecrating authority who certainly does not suffer from inherent blindness and deliberate ignorance; her erroneous nationalization and historization of Danilo Kiš is a result of the demands imposed by the division of the world literary space put forward in *The World Republic of Letters*, which in turn is the result of the only half-hearted liberation of literary theory from the concerns of geopolitical imagination and popular cultural geography. It does not serve Casanova’s best intentions, quoted at the beginning of this article. If peripheral literary revolutionaries are to be defended from “the presumptions, the arrogance, and the fiats of critics in the center” (355), this defence cannot be based on the geopolitical – non-literary, non-autonomous – division between the “East” and “West”, or on the popular cultural geography which translates economic into aesthetic conditions, or on popular media geopolitics. Least of all should it rely on the territorialization of time, considered by Agnew to be the fundamental feature of geopolitical imagination, which involves the “labelling of blocks of global space as exhibiting the essential attributes of the previous historical experience of the dominant block.”⁶² This translation of time into space is pervasive in the making of the modern geopolitical imagination. “Typically, modern geographical taxonomy involves the naming of different regions or areas as ‘advanced’ or ‘primitive’, ‘modern’ or ‘backward’”; Agnew goes on: “Europe and some of its political-cultural offspring (such as the United States) are seen as defining modernity, and other parts of the world figure only in terms of how they appear relative to Europe’s past. Being like or imitating Europe thus becomes a condition for entry into the state system (as opposed to justifying subjugation) and provides the norm or standard of judgement about particular states (who is most advanced, etc.)”⁶³ Casanova’s territorialisation of time – “present located in space”, or “New York time, or Paris time, or London time” (20), but never “Joyce’s time”, “Faulkner’s time” or “Borges’s time” – framed within the Westfalian view and the territorial trap which follows from it, results in a replication of broader geopolitical spaces and conditions instead of a map of the world literary space independent of the geopolitical map. It is only natural that this type of politics of delimitation would result in the implicit equation of the international literary space with the “Western” space, and the Greenwich meridian of literary modernity with the places where the most powerful media, publishers and consecrating authorities reside.

“I hate it when small [literatures] complain that nobody understands them”, Kiš once said.⁶⁴ But he also said: “My ideal library is an open library. Which means: without prejudices with regard to nations, states and languages”.⁶⁵

¹ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 354-355. Hereafter, numbers in brackets refer to pages from this edition.

² Pascale Casanova, “Combative Literatures”, *New Left Review*, 72(2011) 123-134.

³ Christopher Prendergast, “The World Republic of Letters”, in C. Prendergast, (ed.), *Debating World Literature* (London: Verso, 2004), 14.

⁴ For the Westfalian view see John Agnew, *Geopolitics. Re-Visioning World Politics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 12.

⁵ On alternative and multiple modernities see, for example, Dili Parameshwar Gaonkar (ed.), *Alternative Modernities* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2001); S.N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities”, *Daedalus* 129. 1 (2000) 1-29; Peter Van Der Veer, “The Global History of ‘Modernity’”, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 41. 3 (1998) 285-294; Timothy Mitchell, (ed.) *Questions of Modernity* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

⁶ Pascale Casanova, “The Literary Greenwich Meridian: Thoughts on the Temporal Forms of Literary Belief”, *Field Day Review*, 4 (2008) 6-23.

⁷ Anssi Paasi, “Boundaries in a Globalized World”, in K. Anderson et al. (eds), *Handbook of Cultural Geography* (London: Sage, 2003), 464.

⁸ Casanova, “The Literary Greenwich Meridian”, 21.

⁹ On “spaces-of-places” and “spaces-of-flows” see John G. Ruggie, “Territoriality and Beyond: Problematizing Modernity in International Relations”, *International Organization*, 47. 1(1993)139-174.

¹⁰ On Paris as a centre of diffusion (but not of production) see, for example, Danilo Kiš, *Gorki talog iskustva* (Split: Feral Tribune, 1997) 90-91 and 230.

¹¹ Thomas Eekman, *Thirty Years of Yugoslav Literature 1945 – 1975* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1978) 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ Predrag Matvejević, “Grupni portret bez dame”, in Boro Krivokapić (ed.) *Treba li spaliti Kiša?* (Zagreb: Globus, 1980) 278-279.

¹⁵ Kiš, *Gorki talog iskustva*, 135.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁷ Danilo Kiš, *Homo Poeticus. Essays and Interviews* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995) 227-228.

¹⁸ Kiš, *Gorki talog iskustva*, 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 258.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 280.

²² *Ibid.*, 137.

²³ *Ibid.*, 222.

²⁴ Manfred Brauneck, *Europas Theater. 2500 Jahre Geschichte - eine Einführung* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2012) 526.

²⁵ These two words do not appear on cited page 115 of the French edition (or in the Serbo-Croat original: *Čas anatomije*, Zagreb/Belgrade: Globus/Prosveta 1983, pp.112-13), nor is there anything about either the Yugoslav or Serbian intellectual milieu.

²⁶ Danilo Kiš, *Varia* (Belgrade: Prosveta, 2007), 488.

²⁷ Kiš, *Homo Poeticus. Essays and Interviews*, 192.

²⁸ Kiš, *Gorki talog iskustva*, 99.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

³² *Ibid.*, 182.

³³ *Ibid.*, 225.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 67-68.

³⁵ Kiš frequently polemicized with this group. See, for example, *Čas anatomije*, 78-82.

³⁶ To the same effect, Danilo Kiš, *Po-etika, knjiga druga* (Belgrade: Ideje, 1974)35-36 and *Homo Poeticus* (Zagreb/Belgrade: Globus/Prosveta, 1983)153.

³⁷ Kiš, *Gorki talog iskustva*, 91.

³⁸ Kiš, *Homo Poeticus. Essays and Interviews*, 259-260.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 77-78.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 78.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁴⁴ Other authors were less problematic. For example, Alexander Weissberg-Cybulski's *Conspiracy of Silence* was already available in translation in 1952. Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Vospominanie*, published in New York in 1970 both in the original Russian and in English as *Hope against Hope*, was translated in Yugoslavia in 1978.

⁴⁵ Kiš, *Homo poeticus*, 161.

⁴⁶ Kiš, *Gorki talog iskustva*, 219.

⁴⁷ Kiš, *Homo Poeticus. Essays and Interviews*, 187-188.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁴⁹ Kiš, *Gorki talog iskustva*, 135.

⁵⁰ Kiš, *Homo poeticus*, 242-246.

⁵¹ Gilles Troude, *Conflits identitaires dans la Yougoslavie de Tito* (Paris: Association Pierre Belon, 2007); Marie-Janine Calic, *Geschichte Jugoslawiens im 20. Jahrhundert* (Munich: C.H.Beck, 2010, pp.237-254).

⁵² Dragoljub Golubović, "Ogrlica od tuđih bisera", in B. Krivokapić (ed.), *Treba li spaliti Kiša?*, 43.

⁵³ Danilo Kiš, "Niska od niskih pobuda", in *ibid.*, 47.

⁵⁴ Dragoljub Golubović, "Argumenti i pobude", in *ibid.*, 53.

⁵⁵ Kiš, *Čas anatomije* 26, omitted from the English translation in *Homo Poeticus. Essays and Interviews*.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁵⁷ Kiš, *Homo Poeticus. Essays and Interviews*, 19.

⁵⁸ The purpose of these stereotypes was to demonize one side in the war, but their cumulative effect was the demonization of the culture and tradition of one nation. The best starting point for media distortions and manipulations in the 1990s which produced these chauvinist effects is Edward S. Herman and David Peterson "The Dismantling of Yugoslavia", *Monthly*

Review, October 2007, 1-62 (especially pp. 35-46); for the French media, see Fabrice Garniron, *Quand Le Monde... Décryptage des conflits yougoslaves* (Grenoble: Elya Éditions, 2013).

⁵⁹ On Serbian francophonie see Dušan Bataković (ed.), *La Serbie et la France: une alliance atypique* (Belgrade: Institut des Études Balkaniques, 2010). In 1905 all professors of the Technical Faculty of the Belgrade University held doctorates from Central European universities; just under a half of the Law Faculty professors had studied in Central Europe, and slightly over a half in France; in the Faculty of Philosophy, 53% of professors had studied in Central Europe, 39% in France, and only 8% in Russia. (Ljubinka Trgovčević, *Planirana elita. O studentima iz Srbije na evropskim univerzitetima u 19. veku*, Belgrade: Istorijski institut, 2003, p.44). Stojanović supplies similar evidence regarding theatre and books borrowed from the libraries in the 19th and early 20th century. (Dubravka Stojanović, *Kaldrma i asfalt*, Belgrade: UDI, 2009).

⁶⁰ Agnew, *Geopolitics*, 458.

⁶¹ Kiš, *Gorki talog iskustva*, 254.

⁶² Agnew, *Geopolitics*, 11.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ Kiš, *Gorki talog iskustva*, 271.

⁶⁵ Kiš, *Varia*, 515.