

NATIONAL AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE IN THE AGE OF GLOBALIZATION

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In a world of globalization it is the task of literary historians to reassess their national legacy from the new perspective. The past can never be taken for granted and never be forgotten; it is the result of interpretation. Poetic traditions are inseparable from linguistic structures, language as collective memory, and so they cannot be easily transferred into another culture. If historiography cannot do without teleology, we have to think in terms of different teleologies. It is undeniably difficult to fulfill contradictory demands, but a literary historian cannot stop making arguments and counterarguments.

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On May 1, 2004 ten countries joined the European Union. This may affect not only the politics and economy but also the intellectual life of the new member states. The Bologna Program involves a drastic restructuring of higher education and can lead to fundamental changes in a wide range of disciplines, including literary studies. Rarely has the very legitimacy of Comparative Literature been so comprehensively called into question. It is possible that from the beginning of September 2006 the university departments in Hungary representing this discipline will be Comparative Literature departments in name only. In Budapest the courses on the B. A. level are planned to be offered in cultural studies and in literary theory, following the instructions coming from Brussels. The assumption is that in the EU such courses may attract more students than Comparative Literature courses.

At the same time, departments teaching literature written in the vernacular are on the defensive. In a period of globalization, some are concerned about the future of languages of limited distribution, such as Finnish, Estonian, or Hungarian. What good is a writer's message if there is no medium through which to communicate it? That question is asked by writers and literary scholars. As a historian of Hungarian literature, who has also been involved in comparative projects, I shall

try to present here a case study that may give insight into the intellectual climate of a post-Communist society. My conclusions will be drawn from my experience as editor in chief of a new history of Hungarian literature in preparation. Is there an objective in my investigation, an intention through which my meditation might find its place within a broader context? A proposition and a hope that would be pursued in the work to be completed by the end of 2005? I would like to hold up a mirror to literary historiography in which it can recognize its difficulties. What follows is a substantially revised version of a televised public lecture I gave in Budapest in 2004 that should let things emerge with enough clarity to allow us to reflect upon these difficulties.

National or Comparative Literature? This question cannot be answered because it is incorrectly stated. The twenty-first century may bring tendencies pointing towards cultural homogeneity. This change may place literatures that are internationally not too well-known into a new context. In a world of globalization it is the task of literary historians to reassess their national legacy from a new perspective. Instead of believing that it is possible to narrate events 'as they had happened in reality', scholars may be tempted to present the same event from different, sometimes even contradictory perspectives. In the past the emphasis was placed on the personality of the writer or on evolutionary processes; in the future important, perhaps even drastic, changes in the structure of the reading public may serve as a starting point.

1. The Illusion of an Unbiased Literary History

"The age of universal progress", "the period of decline", "the age of rebirth", *From the Enlightenment to a Dark Age, Nation and Progress, Fifty Years of Impatience and Delay*. Such titles suggest that Hungarian literary historiography has been marked by a teleology implying international or national progress. In 1908 János Horváth wrote of literature "written in Hungary, in the Hungarian language, of Hungarian content, and of artistic value". Between the two world wars Antal Szerb spoke of the literature of the church, the aristocracy, the nobility, and the bourgeoisie. In the Communist period a middle ground was sought between the ideals of international social progress and national development. The question arises if these perspectives are still valid in our age. The scholar committed to such conceptions remains, as we have discovered, prisoner to a world of values and representations, which, though valid in a short term, are always presented as absolute.

Today a historian of literature cannot pretend to be an omniscient observer, who believes that facts are free from theoretical preconceptions. Hermeneutics has taught us that preconception is never opposed to understanding; it is a sine qua

non of interpretation. Those who insist on finding what they call the real meaning of a text are unaware of their prejudices. Just as the interpretation of a painting is never limited to the reconstruction of its iconology, since we see it not in its “original state” but as it has been handed down to us by tradition, in a similar way, the message of a poem, novel, or play depends on the history of its reception.

It is misleading to claim that historical events did happen but are no longer accessible in their original identity, for such an assumption would imply a distinction between facts and interpretations as well as the possibility of a value-free transmission of the past. The past can never be taken for granted; it is the result of interpretation. The very concept of the historical event involves an interpretive perspective. A literary work is not an object with some permanent, fixed meaning. Lasting aesthetic value is inseparable from changing interpretations.

What Derrida called “mondialisation” may put national cultures, especially language-based literatures, in a new context. Public taste is affected by popular culture, by an entertainment industry controlled by the international market, and by increasingly globalized, privately owned advertising firms. The rapidly changing conditions, the global economy and media, tourism, the creation of the European Union, and the world-wide dominance of the English language may demand a radical reinterpretation. This is the starting point of my short analysis of some of the key words that have been used by literary historians. Since there is no room for a systematic investigation, I will limit myself to a consideration of biographical, national, comparative, evolutionary, and reception-oriented approaches.

2. Biography and Literary History

In the nineteenth century many books were written with the idea that canonical works can be interpreted with the help of biographical information. This is part and parcel of our legacy; its legitimacy cannot be questioned if we believe in history. Still, it is undeniable that the cult of genius may easily inspire scholars to relegate works of art to biographical fragments. Although we may no longer be satisfied with the structural description of self-sufficient creations, we should avoid the temptation of believing in the identity and homogeneity of human personality closed up in itself, a preconception questioned as early as the fifteenth century by Montaigne and others. It is not enough to say that the portrait of the artist is a respectable genre but cannot dominate historiography. Wölfflin’s ideal of art history without names may lead to far-fetched conclusions, but it is possible to question the homogeneity of an artist’s output. Translation and intertextuality belong to the mode of existence of the literary work of art and make an author’s entire work – what the French call “un oeuvre” in opposition to “une oeuvre” – a questionable entity. Works tend to read and rewrite each other, but such relations are

not limited to texts composed by the same writer. The factors that determine the ultimate meaning of the relation of a work to its historical moment are more diverse. All attempts to generalize about a genre, movement, or period take this assumption as their starting hypothesis.

3. National and Comparative Literary History

One of the most difficult tasks a historian has to face is drawing the line between a value judgment and a personal bias. All judgments are based on preconceptions, whether conscious or unconscious. In the nineteenth century the distinction between the significant and the second-rate was often drawn in terms of contributing to the creation of national identity. Most histories of national literatures focused on the national characteristics of literary works. This conception, whether ethnocentric or language-based, belongs to the past, but the past can never be forgotten. Soon our own world will belong to it. Human beings live in history. If you travel from upper New York state to Arizona, you will see that architecture is rooted in geographical and material conditions that are of profoundly local character. In a similar way, poetic traditions are inseparable from linguistic structures, language as collective memory, and so they cannot be easily transferred into another culture. 'Les mots sont intraduisibles', says one of the finest translators of our age,

malgré ce que les concepts ont d'universel. On sait ce que sont les espèces végétales, mais le *chestnut-tree* de Yeats n'est ni le marronnier ni le chataignier car son environnement, qui fait partie de son sens, c'est pour l'anglophone un village d'Angleterre ou d'Irlande, ou tel collège d'Oxford (Bonnefoy 2000a, 48).

In "English the word is an opening, it is all surface, and in French it is a closing, it is all depth", the same author wrote in another essay (Bonnefoy 2004, 220). Ezra Pound characterized the difference between the Greek and English languages that is of special significance for those who write verse in these two languages in the following manner:

in the case of Greek hexameter rhythm the quantity is supposedly the constant and the position of the accent, the variant. As a matter of fact the quantity is a variable within limits very much greater than permitted in English "pentameter" (accentual) (Pound 1996, 93).

In French the final, in Hungarian the first syllable is stressed. In my essays on Bartók's opera *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, I tried to point out that musical structure is distorted in both the interpretations based on a translated text and the recordings

made with singers with a foreign accent (Szegedy-Maszák 2003, 2005). To sing in a language you do not know is certainly a difficult undertaking, but it clearly reveals the limitations of someone's ability to understand the other. As a remarkable music critic of the early twentieth century wrote, "one should discourage singing in unassimilated foreign tongues" (Pound 1977, 98). All I could add is that such singing is comparable to bad translations.

Speaking about the idea that poetry is what cannot be translated, Hugh Kenner quoted the following lines of Keats:

Forlorn: the very word is like a bell
To toll me back from thee to my sad self.

The very word, we may be persuaded, is like a bell, in a language where the syllables of *forlorn* can enact a grave equable tolling, and where *bell* rings clear with the *l*-sound in which *forlorn* turns. But "Perdu: l'expression même est comme une cloche"? It simply isn't" (Kenner 1971, 128–129).

I wonder if Bonnefoy was aware of Kenner's observation when he translated The English poet's *Ode to the Nightingale* into French. My impression is that his version, published almost thirty years later, supports his thesis that English poetry is hardly translatable into French: 'Perdu! Ce mot lui-même et comme un glas / Qui ne prive to toi et me rend à rien / Que ce que je puis être' (Bonnefoy 2000b, 22).

In 1914, several years before Walter Benjamin wrote his celebrated essay *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers*, Dezső Kosztolányi published his translation collection *Modern Poets* with a short preface in which he gave an interpretation far more radical than his contemporary. Asking his readers to look at his translations not in place of but side by side with the originals, he made a persuasive case for the untranslatable, a presupposition he later expanded in numerous essays on the signified and the signifier as two possible starting points for those who wished to recreate a linguistic utterance in another language. "I regard translation as creation and not as making copies", he wrote. "The so-called original text is comparable to the object of the painting" (Kosztolányi 1988, 1: 531).

Bonnefoy and Kenner spoke of a wide gap between English and French. Kosztolányi, a poet and prose writer whose firm belief was that it was not the author but language that was responsible for creating verbal art, could take a more radical position because in his case the distance between the source and the target languages (that is, cultures) was even greater. Like Finnish and Estonian, Hungarian does not belong to the family of Indo-European languages. The fact that Kosztolányi developed a language-based cultural relativism, yet translated *The Winter's Tale*, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, as well as texts by authors ranging from Villon to Antonio Machado, Donne to Rilke, Goethe to Baudelaire,

Faulkner to Futurist and Imagist poets suggests that although he may have been convinced that rhythm was not translatable, he did not resign himself to the impossibility of his task. He was convinced that communication was inseparable from translation, taking it for granted that the success of a translation always depended on how it was received in the target culture.

Comparative literature may remind us that translation and interpretation are closely related. The presupposition that “l’interprétation est *ouverte* (...); et la traduction est *fermée*” (Bonnefoy 2000, 47) is in contradiction with the legacy of hermeneutics. Still, it is easier to construct a theory about the combination of national and comparative literary history than to practice it. Instead of trying to reach a compromise between different cultures, comparative studies should aim at a “‘testing’ of one way of thinking by another” (Bonnefoy 2004, 224). The comparison of literatures in languages of wide distribution has an established tradition, but the historians of literatures in languages of limited distribution have to choose between two options: either they may continue to discuss the works written in their mother tongues in terms of a teleology based on a hypothetical development of national character or they can try to link them to internationally well-known works. Let me admit that I find the discussion of Hungarian literature in some comparative works a little problematic. I have been involved in such projects for more than thirty years, so I am painfully aware of the difficulties of the task. Let me mention a book published a long time ago, *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1982). I greatly respected its editor, Anna Balakian, reviewed and taught this collection, yet could never overcome the feeling that in some of its chapters certain texts were discussed not because they represented Symbolism but because some scholars tried to find international recognition for works they admired. The tendency to regard less accessible literatures as copies of the so-called great literatures I find somewhat unsatisfactory. On the one hand, specialists of cultures attached to languages of limited distribution may regard the international treatment of their cultures rather superficial; on the other hand, it may be argued that reading in one’s mother tongue, in some other language, and in translation are three distinct modes of understanding, and so it is quite possible that the ‘same’ work is more important from one and less important from another perspective. That may explain the difference between national fame and international recognition. In 2002 Imre Kertész was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. There are Hungarian readers who fail to understand this decision, because they regard other works by contemporary writers as more significant. What these readers may not realize is that value judgments depend on perspectives. *Fatelessness* has become an important contribution to the international canon of holocaust literature. In other words, it has been taken out from the canon of Hungarian literature and placed in another context.

In the visual arts it may be much easier to think in terms of international trends and influences than in literature. It might be possible, for instance, to speak about the legacy of Caravaggio in those paintings of Georges de La Tour (1593–1652) and Joseph Wright of Derby (1734–1797) in which “chiaroscuro” (the contrast between light and darkness) plays a major role, and the connections between the paintings of Claude Gellée (le Lorrain) and Turner, or Turner and Monet are even more well-known. Literature is so closely tied to language that it is much more difficult to demonstrate such analogies. Petrarchism may have been one of the few trends with implications for literatures in several Western languages. In more recent periods it would be less easy to find trends that transcend linguistic boundaries, especially if we try to break free of Eurocentrism.

It goes without saying that the autonomy of local cultures is a mere illusion. History has known many cases in which one culture became subordinated to another. The question is whether we are not moving in a direction that can lead to an entirely new phase in which the globalization of the media could go together with a decline of local cultures. While it may be true that translation ‘est une des activités de notre temps malheureux qui pourraient contribuer à sauver le monde’ (Bonnefoy 2000, 44), there are different degrees of translatability. The *Concerto for Orchestra* is the internationally most popular work of Béla Bartók. It is not necessarily his finest composition. Language-based works are even more difficult to translate. Some years ago one of my American doctoral students fell in love with a nineteenth-century Hungarian novel written about seventeenth-century Transylvania. He is planning to translate it into English, despite my warning that there can be no market for such a work. An unsophisticated equation between accessibility and aesthetic value has to be avoided, but it may be difficult to resolve the conflict between local and international values.

4. Evolution and Literary History

Biographical, national, and comparative approaches to literary history have one element in common: they rely on the metaphor of organic growth leading from youth to maturity and decadence when defining the place of a given work in history. Consciously or unconsciously, most literary histories show the influence of Giorgio Vasari’s *Le Vite de’ più eccellenti pittori, scultori ed architetti*. The mimetic value of painting or drawing on a flat surface may have developed in the course of some centuries, but it would be difficult to find a similar teleology in the history of music or literature. The attempts to rank the different modes of literary representation have inflicted severe damage to the understanding of verbal art. The rise of free verse or the growing emphasis on the portrayal of the mind of the characters may be regarded as processes counterbalanced by other historical phe-

nomena. The orchestration of *La symphonie fantastique* is new in comparison with that of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*, but in terms of thematic development the earlier opus could be called much more 'advanced' than the French composer's work. Gustave Kahn's free verse poems show a more innovative prosody than Mallarmé's sonnets, yet it would be a mistake to call the latter more conservative. New and old, creation and imitation are matters of historical perspective. Johann Sebastian Bach's cantata "Gottes Zeit ist die allerbeste Zeit" (BWV 106), known as *Actus tragicus*, was taken for an archaic work in the early eighteenth century. For the Romantics it seemed a highly innovative, even experimental, composition.

In a postcolonial world, it is especially dangerous to think in terms of one-sided oppositions. The understanding of the cultures of languages of limited distribution is difficult until we discard our faith in the homogeneity of *Zeitgeist*. The volume on Symbolism mentioned earlier contains several chapters on works that have not much to do with the definition of that movement outlined in the opening section of the book. Mallarmé was not religious, insisted on the impersonal nature of poetry, and excluded both moral teaching and political message from art. Ady was a poet of the egotistical sublime and published both devotional and openly political poems. A certain looseness in the use of concepts may perhaps help to explain why less well-known literatures have not succeeded in joining the international canon. To make Ady accessible for the international community, it would be necessary either to redefine Symbolism or to stop calling this Hungarian poet a Symbolist. To be fair to the volume in question, it has to be added that although it contains a chapter on Ady's poetry, its author did his best to avoid calling it a manifestation of Symbolism.

5. Literary History with a Reader-response Orientation

Sometimes it is argued that the tension between artistic and historical values can be resolved by focusing on the reception of literary works. Undeniably, the historians of national literatures have paid little attention to the life of the works.

In recent decades, the idea of the self-sufficient work of art has been replaced by an emphasis on *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Interest has shifted from studio to live recordings. The ideal of objective interpretation represented by Stravinsky, Hindemith, and Toscanini has been superseded by that of personal involvement represented by such artists as Wilhelm Furtwängler in the past or Christian Thielemann among our contemporaries. It would be a simplification to regard this change in taste as a return to the legacy of Romanticism. The history of performance practice both in literature and in music shows that interpreters had more freedom before the twentieth century. In Elizabethan England the dividing line between actors

and playwrights was not clear-cut. Bach, Mozart, and Liszt were both composers and performers.

Those who ask for the restoration of what they call the original meaning of a work of art represent a profoundly anti-historical position. Translations, adaptations, Renaissance plays, or the works of such authors as Henry James, Dezső Kosztolányi, or Attila József may remind us that a text is never a given entity; it recreates and thus questions its own integrity. In Romantic poetry it is often pointless to ask whether fragmentariness is intentional or accidental, just as it is meaningless to argue if a painting is finished or not. Distinguished scholars suggest that it is by no means certain that we can continue to speak of masterpieces or modernity. Well-known critics have spoken about the tradition of innovation. In any case, the origin of the concept of genius can be traced back to hero worship, a cult that can be regarded as outmoded.

The conclusion is inescapable that it follows from the mode of existence of the literary work of art that the reader has a task similar to the activity of an editor who considers different versions. Rereading is closely related to rewriting and translation. To insist on the restoration of original meaning would mean that we ascribe an essence to the work of art that is independent of both space and time. The public's response to *The Merchant of Venice* may have been affected by the tragedy of the holocaust. Since interpretation involves reading according to given circumstances, a literary historian has to examine how readers, who lived in different places and periods, responded to texts. The main difficulty in achieving this goal is the limited access we have to the information on the history of reception. Musicologists may be better off, since performances have been recorded for a century or so. Much less is known about the history of reading. Because of the limited range of interpretations preserved in writing, we have to reconstruct the interrelations of reading habits, linguistic conventions, artistic, ideological, and political attitudes, social institutions, and the media that serve to record, transfer, and develop information.

6. Tentative Conclusions

To the question as to how literary history can be written in the twenty-first century my tentative answer is that teleology has to be both affirmed and denied. In contrast to those who stay within the limits of the canon established and preserved by institutions, we can never stop asking ourselves on what grounds certain texts have left their mark on culture. Historical impact and artistic value are in constant interaction.

It is possible that the history of a national literature can no longer be told as a narrative, just as the identity of an author's output or the continuity of the legacy of

a genre can be questioned. Having lost their identities, literary works can serve as starting points for several histories. The ideal of a finished, complete, and definitive interpretation has to be rejected, since understanding per definition is partial. Teleologies create canons, but canons are incompatible with history. One of the difficulties in writing a new history of Hungarian literature is that those who read in this language represent a divided public that consists of interpretive communities with different, even incompatible value systems. No one can claim to have the authority that could guarantee irrefutable judgments.

If historiography cannot do without teleology, we have to think in terms of different teleologies. They are needed if we assume that literature can also be considered to be a cultural legacy that should be preserved and taught. At the same time, it cannot be forgotten that every significant work is in a sense a new start. Starting from scratch was an ideal shared by some at the time of the 're-naissance' and the 're-formation', as well as by the Romantics who viewed the primitive, medieval, or the exotic as an antidote to the illnesses caused by modernization.

It is undeniably difficult to fulfill contradictory demands, but a literary historian cannot stop making arguments and counterarguments. The texts we are working with are not finished products standing outside time but formations that are constantly recreated by new generations. We are writing the history of changing interpretations, so it may be more important to put our work on the internet than to publish it in a book form that gives no room for perpetual modifications.

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