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CANON, TRANSLATION, AND LITERARY HISTORY

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Abstract: How far can canon and language be sources of (dis)continuity in literary history? Continuity and discontinuity are concepts of such complexity that only philosophers can hope to make a successful attempt to define them in general terms. All I can offer is a tentative analysis of their significance for literary history. Since even such an investigation would ask for a lengthy treatment if conducted on an abstract level, I shall limit myself to reflections on how continuity and discontinuity are related to the concepts of canon and language. In the second half of my paper a personified abstraction called nation will also be introduced with the intention of making some remarks on the legitimacy of the terms national and world literature. The essay also raises the question of whether it is possible to write literary history in a postmodern world.

Key words: canon, literary history, translation, globalization, nation

In this study I would like to make three points. The question to be posed at the outset is how far canon and language can be sources of (dis)continuity in literary history, before commenting on the significance and difficulties of translation. To conclude, the paper will touch upon the relations between national literatures and "Weltliteratur".

To avoid possible misunderstandings, literary history is regarded as writing ("écriture"). Its alleged objects are texts and its mode of interpretation and representation – the result of the interrelations of remembering and forgetting, constructing and deconstructing – is written narrative. Literary works are viewed from the perspective of "Wirkungsgeschichte" as historical events and experiences that can only be narrated. It is assumed that historical events and experiences cannot be remembered (passed on) without linguistic articulation. Neither the phenomenology of memory nor the epistemology of history can be known in any other form. "Autrement dit, la temporalité constitue la précondition existentiale de la référence de la mémoire et de l'histoire au passée" (Ricoeur 2000:454).

The topic has obvious practical implications. It raises the question of whether it is possible to write literary history in a postmodern world. Ours may be an unprecedented moment in history, a moment in which almost all methods

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are possible, a moment in which almost everything seems open. In principle, more cultural products are available now than could have been in any earlier period. Because of this, it is very difficult to decide what needs to be preserved. Forgetting is a necessary condition of mental health, but accessibility can be manipulated. What should be read, performed, exhibited, discussed, and taught? I am deeply preoccupied by these questions.

Scholarship cannot exist without the reinterpretation of earlier results. "Irrthum (– der Glaube an's Ideal –) ist nicht Blindheit, Irrthum ist F e i g h e i t", says Nietzsche, urging us to challenge received views (1969:257). The de(con)struction of concepts was an integral part of the legacy of the twentieth century. As Heidegger argued at the beginning of *Sein und Zeit*, progress in scholarship – he put the word "Bewegung" in inverted commas – involved a drastic reexamination of widely accepted terms. "Das Niveau einer Wissenschaft bestimmt sich daraus, wie weit sie einer Krisis über Grundbegriffe *fähig* ist" (1976:9).

Continuity and discontinuity are concepts of such complexity that only philosophers can hope to make a successful attempt to define them in general terms. All I can try is a tentative analysis of their significance for literary history. Since even such an investigation would ask for a lengthy treatment if conducted on an abstract level, I shall limit myself to reflections on how continuity and discontinuity are related to the concepts of canon and language. In the second half of my paper, a personified abstraction called *nation* will also be introduced with the intention of making some remarks on the legitimacy of the terms *national* and *world literature*.

1. THE CONCEPT OF THE CANON: MASTERPIECE AND EVOLUTION

In recent decades much has been written on canonicity, not only in the West but also in Eastern Europe. I use this geopolitical term with reference to the decades of the Cold War. The collapse of the Eastern bloc exerted a profound influence on cultural canons. On the outskirts of some capitals in the region, there is a cemetery for sculptures that date from the decades of Communism. After 1989 textbooks, anthologies, curricula, libraries, theatres, museums, repertoires were affected by the political changes. Of course, these changes did not happen overnight, but one cannot deny that the current situation is radically different from that of the earlier decades. The dichotomy of official vs. unofficial canons has disappeared. The material of the so-called "samizdat" publications and the works written by authors who spent several decades in exile have become canonized. The fiction of Sándor Márai is a case in point. He was born in Kassa

(today Kosice) in 1900. Up to 1948, when he was forced to leave his country by György Lukács and other Communists, he was one of the most influential writers in Hungary. In February 1989, when he committed suicide in San Diego, California, he was virtually unknown to the younger generations in his homeland. In 1991, when my book on him appeared, the works he had published in the West in the last four decades of his life were inaccessible in Hungary. Ironically, no translation of any of those works appeared in the United States, where he spent the last decades of his life. Today all his output is available in Hungary. Recently a major American publisher brought out one of his novels. This novel (*Embers*) is certainly not one of his best works. The American translation is based not on the original but on the German version, which became a bestseller at the 1999 Frankfurt Book Fair. Still, such qualifications cannot change the fact that Márai's international success may contribute to his canonical status in Hungarian literature.

Other cases would also suggest that the continuity and discontinuity of canons are vital issues in Postcommunism. One may think of Nabokov, for instance, whose works can be read either in Russian or in English. It is often misleading to speak about an original and a translation. East-European writers who compromised themselves in the period of totalitarianism could also cite the fate of East German art.

In the first half of this paper I propose to re-examine the canon, this fascinating if frequently criticized concept that is closely related to both tradition and discontinuity in literary history. Canons, norms, institutions, and expectations may conflict with progressive linearity. The canon can stand for continuity with the past, it can be viewed as the result of the activity of preserving it, keeping it in mind ("retention," as Ricoeur says in *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli* (2000:40), but it can also involve a rediscovery of the forgotten ("ressouvenir") which may lead to discontinuity. The revival of interest in the English poetry of the seventeenth century after World War I can serve as a well-known example. T. S. Eliot's claim that "in the seventeenth century a dissociation of sensibility set in, from which we have never recovered" (1962:28), his remark that "our mentality and feelings are better expressed by the seventeenth century than by the nineteenth or even the eighteenth" (1993:43) can be called paradigmatic in the sense that they indicate how closely re-discovery may be tied to the discontinuity of tradition. If historical time is comparable to a flux, both forgetting and the re-appropriation of the forgotten can be viewed as discontinuity.

Evolution is a process; the masterwork can appear as standing outside this process as a marked entity that differs from unmarked continuity. Of course, it can also happen that a masterwork creates an alternative continuity; retrospectively, it reinterprets what happened earlier. In short, canonicity can be defined both as identity and as difference.

Those who talk about canonicity may start from two different assumptions: they may ascribe a canonical status either to works of lasting value or to artifacts that break free from tradition. There might be a tension between these two criteria. On the one hand, the concept of the canon implies the transformation of the temporal into the timeless; "zum Raum, wird hier die Zeit," as Gurnemanz says to Parsifal, reminding the fool of the opposition between the worlds of the wanderer who seems willing to adapt to different circumstances and the representative of a permanent value system rooted in local conditions. Such permanence is not easily compatible with the idea that a work of art foreshadows later phenomena; it represents a stage in an evolution and has to be seen in the context of a teleological process. The fiction of Gogol anticipates that of Dostoevsky; in *Bleak House* there are Kafkaesque elements; *Bagatelle sans tonalité*, a late composition by Liszt, paves the way for twelve-tone music; some paintings by Caspar David Friedrich can be approached from the perspective of Expressionism. Cultural historians cannot avoid the temptation of making such claims about continuity.

Imagine Gogol reading *The Possessed* or *The Master and Margarita*. A voice calls out: "Is this what you were trying to accomplish?" Some literary historians assume that Gogol's answer would unequivocally be "Yes." Yet, Gogol might well have thought differently, and if we could then imagine on what grounds he would have been critical of Dostoevsky and Bulgakov, we would have a very different understanding of *The Cloak* or *Dead Souls* than the one we have now, which depends upon seeing these two works, together with *The Double*, *The Possessed*, and *The Master and Margarita*, in the context of an unfolding process, belonging to the same evolutionary history. My examples are arbitrary. I could also refer to Emerson, Whitman, Stevens, and Ashbery, whose works are treated as four stages in one continuous narrative by Harold Bloom. Vasari had started a tradition that continued to attract later scholars. They constructed a canon by stipulating the end of a history. Teleology as a secularized form of "Heilsgeschichte" is often the principle underlying the idea of continuity.

It is hypothesized that *Beowulf* and *The Ambassadors* do not necessarily belong to the same history. *Beowulf* stands in the centre of a body of texts. Many of the marginal texts composed in the early Middle Ages are studied as examples of Old English by specialists of historical linguistics or folklore rather than by literary scholars. *The Ambassadors*, on the other hand, is usually analysed as one of the masterpieces created by a writer whose *oeuvre* as a whole is very impressive in an aesthetic sense. Most of the novels published in English on either side of the Atlantic in 1903 have been forgotten by now. The same reader may approach the Old English epic and the novel by the American-born Master with entirely different expectations.

With languages of more limited distribution the discontinuity is even more striking. As far as I know, no novel in Slovak was published before 1800, and because of this, historians seriously consider most of the novels written in that language in the nineteenth century. All the poems written in Hungarian before 1500 are studied at Hungarian universities and listed in histories of that literature. It is possible that these texts do not belong with the verse of Petőfi, Attila József, or Pilinszky.

A "Meisterlied" is the product of education and craftsmanship. It may rely on knowledge and its structure is based on certain rules. Originality, innovation, and paradigm shift may contradict this ideal, even if we grant that some prescriptions are always neglected; "Sieben Fehler gibt er Euch vor", sings Beckmesser when he is commissioned to evaluate the achievement of the contesters. The serenade of the "Stadtschreiber" is as much an integral part of *Die Meistersinger* as the song of Walter von Stolzing. We may even wonder whether the way Beckmesser distorts the borrowed material in Act III is not more "progressive" music than the Ritter's song which is much closer to the tradition of the German "Lied". To Walter's question – "Ein schönes Lied – ein Meisterlied: / wie fass ich da den Unterschied?" – Sachs gives an answer that is more complex than it sounds, especially if we remember his warning at the end of Act III: "Verachtet mir die Meister nicht, / und ehrt mir ihre Kunst!" What he suggests is that tradition involves the bringing back of the past into the present. As such, it cannot be created, yet to experience it means to break it.

What Beckmesser sings may remind us of the Romantics' desire to make the "ugly" acceptable in the arts. *Die Meistersinger* also helps us understand the vulnerability of the Platonic or even Kantian idea that art means the same thing in different periods. In most periods canons were constructed but it would be misleading to believe that the criteria of canonicity were the same throughout the centuries. If we look at the histories of the various national literatures, it appears that in most of them all the available early texts are discussed. At some point in history a selection is introduced, but it rarely happens that the reader is told about the criteria underlying that selection. In other words, there is a concealed discontinuity in most histories of national literatures.

While the different versions of Balzac's tale *Le Chef d'Oeuvre inconnu* undermine the ideal of the finished product, *The Madonna of the Future*, an early work by James that clearly relies on the French story, insists on the impossibility of creating new masterpieces. Poussin is unable to see Frenhofer's painting. Theobald's conclusion is that a masterpiece can be an ideal but not a real object. The underlying assumption may be that a work can become a masterpiece only on the basis of some consensus, and in our world no such consensus can be reached. Seeing the disappearance of the colours in the Venetian paintings of Tintoretto in 1871, lamenting the disappearance of a great tradition in the visual arts of Italy in 1877, James speculated about the mutability of values

and the very existence of masterpieces. Today Géricault's masterpiece, *The Raft of Medusa,* Delacroix's mural in the Church of Saint-Sulpice, and even the panels Rothko did for Harvard are also blackened.

In comparison with James's insistence on the aging of works, the position of Paul de Man or Hans Robert Jauss seems almost conservative. Richards, Tate, Blackmur, Robert Penn Warren, or Cleanth Brooks played a major role in making works by Henry James, Stevens, Pound, T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore, Hart Crane, or Faulkner canonical. The collection *Understanding Poetry* made some pieces widely known. Of course, de Man had a philosophical training as well as a familiarity with numerous French and German texts none of the New Critics could claim to have; yet he focused on literary texts that had become canonical long before he started his career in North America. With all their limitations, the New Critics may have done more for the opening of the canon than the Yale School, which sometimes spoke about the necessity of destroying canons. I wonder if this difference is related to the fact that New Criticism, like Russian Formalism, developed in close contact with contemporary literature, and so many of the New Critics combined essay writing with composition of poetry or fiction. It is even possible that they may have realized that the end of mimetic credibility, together with what may be called heightened fictionality, make it rather difficult to select the works that are of canonical status. In the visual arts, a similar role could be attributed to abstraction. It is certainly far from easy to draw the line between masterpieces and works of inferior value when discussing the free verse of avant-garde poets, the "Neo-Plastic" compositions of Mondrian, the *Spanish Elegies* series of Motherwell, or the Abstract Expressionist works of Mark Rothko or Franz Kline.

Along with the fact that criteria change, another problem may arise when talking about the canonicity of works that belong to different genres. What we mean by canonical status may not be the same in the cases of such works as Goethe's eight-line *Über allen Gipfeln* and *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Different interpreters of literature may have different rhetorics of scale. For Valéry or Heidegger canonical status was associated with the timelessness of the short lyric, whereas for Bakhtin the complex dialogical character of long narratives seemed to be the main criterion. The second of these positions would imply that a major artist should aim to succeed in great, perhaps even monumental works. In any case, canonicity is closely linked to institutionalization. For some a lyric is often canonical if many remember it; for others, it is the huge works that capture the imagination. In the case of a longer work, however, canonicity may be limited to certain memorable passages.

The dilemma is inescapable: canonicity can be defined as a triumph over time or as a surpassing of earlier models – what could be called a fundamental direction. Some of those who prefer the second of these alternatives use the term "paradigm shift". Jauss was an important representative of this interpreta-

tion of canonicity, suggesting that twentieth-century literature could be described in terms of the succession of trends that could be called classical or high modern, avant-garde, late and postmodern. The history of science can be written as a temporal sequence. An earlier theory is often replaced and even invalidated by a later one. In the arts, it is more difficult to imagine such a sequence, since transformations cannot be called definitive in the same way as in science. It would be ridiculous to claim that Shakespeare or J. S. Bach have been surpassed by any later playwright or composer. In 1983 Hans Belting published a book with the following title: *Das Ende der Kunstgeschichte?* Ten years later the revised version appeared with the same title but without a question mark. In his more recent book, *Das unsichtbare Meisterwerk: Die modernen Mythen der Kunst* (1998) he went as far as questioning the unified concept of modernity as a basis for writing a history of the arts in the last two hundred years. In 2001, an exhibition of the works of Arnold Böcklin was organized with the aim of reminding the visitors of the Musée d'Orsay that the paintings of this Swiss artist could not be interpreted as part of a history leading from Naturalism to Impressionism.

Most histories of national literatures are based on either of two teleologies: the transformation of literature is viewed as the evolution, the progressive unconcealing of a national character, or as progress comparable to scientific or technological progress. The first of these two models was especially popular in the period of the birth of nation states. Textbooks, anthologies, literary histories, national galleries, historical novels, and national operas were made to suggest that the arts were manifestations of imagined communities. This model represented a delicate balance between the two criteria of canonicity.

The conflict between these two ideals is much more obvious in the case of the second model. When assuming a supranational chronology, the historians of modernity often ignore cultures that are inaccessible to them. Even Wellek's history of Western criticism fails to discuss those works which its author could not read in the original. Music compositions that are rarely performed are often excluded. In the visual arts, the canon is based on the collections of well-known museums and on the material of some auctions. Films play a major role in making literature, the visual arts, and even music canonical. The idea that the more advanced a work is the more canonical it seems may be in contradiction with the fact that in both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries many works were composed that could be called conservative. The symphonies of Brahms, *Der Rosenkavalier* or Pfitzner's *Palestrina* are relatively well-known examples. One could also refer to the music of Rachmaninov, Prokofiev, Britten, Shostakovich, or even to the role of pastiche in the activity of Ravel, the composer of such works as *Menuet antique* (1895), *Le tombeau de Couperin* (1917), and *Valses nobles et sentimentales* (1911), "chaînes de valses à l'exemple de Schubert". not to mention the Neoclassicism that represented a strong reaction against the

avant-garde after World War I. In literature, it is even more difficult to postulate an evolution in international terms, because of the diversity of natural languages and the uneven quality of translations. The ideal of linear progress is further undermined by our growing awareness of cultures that do not belong to the Western world. We can see not only the *Gioconda* but also sculpture from the Pacific Islands in the Musée du Louvre. Our awareness of the relations of time and space has changed.

Evolution, paradigm shift, or even epochal threshold ("Epochenschwelle"), the term used by the Konstanz school, may contradict canonicity. A canon suggests permanence, whereas modernity implies traveling without arrival, an endless search, a perpetual transition. As Marinetti's declaration on museums or the attack made on opera houses by the young Boulez may remind us, one of the goals of the avant-garde was the destruction of canons and the rejection of institutionalized continuities. At the end of his life, in 1954 Wyndham Lewis published a provocative book, *The Demon of Progress in the Arts*. His thesis that the desire to overcome the past may lead to the end of art was anticipated by Balzac. In *Gambara* (1830), one of the characters claims that the "new school" has surpassed Beethoven, whereas another argues that lasting value is not necessarily compatible with the desire to move further. The structure of Gluck's operas is contrasted with the episodic nature of Meyerbeer's music and Beethoven's sublimity is opposed to Rossini's superficial innovations. The orchestra of *La Symphonie fantastique* certainly sounds different from that of Beethoven, but the *Ninth Symphony* represents a far more advanced technique of thematic development. One of the reasons for historical discontinuity may be that what happened earlier may turn out to be more innovative than what came later. If we accept the idea that the history of the modern novel can be written in terms of a growing emphasis on the interior life of the characters, self-reflexive playfulness, or the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere – one may think of the works of Käte Hamburger, Viktor Zmegac, or Pierre Bourdieu – many works are relegated to the status of belated or anachronistic phenomena.

The division of Europe in the middle of the twentieth century often made historians believe in a dichotomy between a progressive West and a backward East. Those who argued that Western trends made their impact in the East with a "décalage" forgot the role conservatism played in the Western world. It is worth remembering that two of the most influential Western thinkers of the twentieth century, Heidegger, the author of the essay "Warum bleiben wir in der Provinz?", and Wittgenstein, insisted on the role of heritage in culture. While *Finnegans Wake* may be one of the greatest literary works written in the last century, the range between this novel and *The Forsyte Saga* is extremely wide. The novels of Thomas Mann, Roger Martin du Gard, or D. H. Lawrence may suggest that much of the fiction of the twentieth century represents continuity with such aspects of nineteenth-century fiction as the "Bildungsroman" or the

genealogical principle. Martin du Gard tried to continue the narrative tradition of Tolstoy, Mann insisted on a balance of values and rejected extremes throughout his long career, and Lawrence often relied on the narrative technique of Hardy.

The disappearance of the iron curtain and the creation of a greater European Union may also affect interpretations of modernity. Postmodernity has undermined the idea that free verse, stream of consciousness, non-figurative art, or atonal music represent definitive answers. In the past, modernity was often defined in terms of discontinuity, a departure from an earlier historical model that was granted a timeless status. A novel was called modern if it differed from Realism. For Lukács this meant decadence; for Robbe-Grillet liberation. It seems that both misrepresented Balzac.

2. NATION, LANGUAGE, AND LITERATURE

"Kunst ist eine historische Fiktion, (…) und Kunstgeschichte ist es ebenfalls", says Belting (1995:118). If a history is based on canonicity – whether in the form of a sequence of masterpieces or in that of a teleological process – that seems questionable, we have to find some other criteria for literary history. In the rest of my discussion of (dis)continuity I shall focus on the concepts of *nation, language* (meaning native language or mother tongue), and *literature*. Pursuing this line of questioning, there is a need to address two issues: the role of translations and the relations between national literatures and world literature. Among the three concepts (nation, language, and literature), the second is taken as our point of departure. Such a preconception implies that nations are tied not to ethnic origin. It also suggests that the (dis)continuity of a national community and that of a literature may depend on the (dis)continuity of a specific language. Following the tradition of Wilhelm von Humboldt, I am tempted to find linguistic reasons for the diversity of cultures. Language is taken in a broad sense as polyglossia, to use Bakhtin's term. Linguistic utterances or texts are viewed as constructs that frame national identity, and literatures are considered to be the self-interpretations of the various nations. Language stands for the collective memory that creates an imagined community. Literature is also taken in a broad sense: it is assumed that lyrics, fiction, and drama but also descriptive and discursive texts belong to it.

I also include political discourse. The public speeches of statesmen, together with media programs and newspaper articles, contribute to the writing of the autobiography of every nation. From the perspective of a literary historian a national community is the product of intertextuality, the interrelations between different types of linguistic utterances. The core of a national canon consists of

texts native speakers can read in their first language. Although I would not go so far as eliminating the difference between novel and historiography, the distinction between fiction and nonfiction is so problematic that it is well beyond my powers to examine it here. Instead, let me quote Antoine Compagnon on this thorny issue: "Il faut qu'une porte soit ouverte ou fermée. Mais la plupart des portes sont entrouverte ou mi-closes" (1998:281). Naturally, it could be argued that fiction and nonfiction depend on horizons of expectation, agreements between author and reader, but the distinction is hard to make not only in morphological but also in pragmatic terms. Facts are not given entities but the results of intellectual speculation. The battle of Waterloo is no less context-dependent than the illness of Milly Theale. The same applies to facts in literary history. As Danto remarks, "we do not know what the *work* is until we locate the plane from which it is to be interpreted" (2000:259).

Most histories of national literatures had been written with the intention of fixing the identity of what the members of a community accepted as their own. Such works played an important role in the creation of nation states. In our age of globalization (or "mondialisation") there seems to be an urgent need for a dialogue between the other and us. Translation as the appropriation of the foreign involves a highly risky transformation and transvaluation for the simple reason that the values of the source culture and the target culture often seem incompatible. The problems for the translator of a work by a historian may resemble those the translator of a novel has to face. What we have here may be not so much a "Horizontverschmälzung" or a dialogue but a conflict, a radical form of discontinuity. We cannot say the same thing in German and Chinese. The gap may be especially wide between those languages which had hardly any interrelations in history.

Our broad interpretation of literature may also affect our attitude towards translation. "Le devoir et la tâche d'un écrivain sont ceux d'un traducteur", wrote Proust (1989, t. IV:489). What he may have meant was that in a sense all writing was translation. The appropriation of what is not ours is a sine qua non of interpretation, and its difficulties are similar in most genres. Proper names, for instance, occur both in novels and in historiography. Their untranslatability may constitute a major difficulty that one has when reading a text written in a foreign language. *The Tragedy of Man* might be the most frequently translated piece of Hungarian literature because it contains almost no reference to Hungarian history. In other words, it seems to be an integral part of the continuity of what is usually called Western culture.

In any case, a text that has become canonical in one literature does not necessarily carry its status into another culture. One of the questions a comparative scholar may ask is what the members of one linguistic and cultural community get out of a text that belongs to a foreign culture. Historical ties between two cultures may contribute to bridging the gap. Let me mention just one example.

The pun in the title *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* is absent from its English and French versions (*The Task of the Translator*, *La tâche du traducteur*). In Hungarian the verb "feladni" means "to give up", so on a semantic level "feladat" is close to "Aufgabe". In the period of the language reform of the early nineteenth century many servile or literal translations ("calques") of German expressions entered the Hungarian language, and this legacy proved to be permanent. For this reason, the German translation of *Harmonia caelestis*, a long novel by Péter Esterházy that appeared in 2000, is much more successful than the French version published by Gallimard.

Translation separates the signifier from the signified. This seems almost as problematic as transforming a painting into a sculpture or pentatonic into twelve-tone music. Internal repetitions, rhymes, puns, and syntax may create a meaning that will disappear if the signifier is changed. Yet, translation as cultural dialogue is part of the mode of existence of literature. A good translation is an "Aufhebung"; it destroys and replaces, eliminates and transubstantiates the so-called original text. The quality of the translation depends on the translator's command of the target culture rather than on his/her familiarity with the source language. That is why Pound's Sophocles may be superior to some English translation by an outstanding Classical philologist, which may not survive (in the sense of "überleben") the translation, that is, it cannot continue its life (in the sense of "fortleben") in the target culture. For the same reason, translations by those who are native speakers of the source language are usually dead in the sense that they are unable to develop a dialogue with texts of a similar genre composed in the target language.

The demand for translation is especially strong in the case of small nations. Larger linguistic communities have a better chance for survival, because they can attract writers born into other linguistic communities. In the past the Flemish Verhaeren and Maeterlinck, the Romanian Tzara, Cioran, and Ionesco, the Russian Sarraute, the Irish Beckett, the Spanish Semprun, and Czech Kundera, the Hungarian Ágota Kristóf and Éva Almássy decided to write in French. Today globalization is closely tied to the English language. It is supported by the media, which create the illusion of a homogeneous world culture. Goethe predicted the formation of a "Weltliteratur". What he viewed as a possible future may become our present.

A national literature involves reading in one's mother tongue. It is inseparable from a reading public that consists of native speakers. Reading in a foreign language is a radically different experience. In certain respects it may be more limited, depending on the reader's familiarity with the other culture, but sometimes it may lead to a more sophisticated interpretation, at least in certain respects. What we call world literature is tied to reading in translation, which is a third kind of experience. In medieval Europe, Latin served as a language of international communication, in the eighteenth century French played a similar

role and in nineteenth-century Central Europe German had this function. It may happen that in the future English will become the primary language of world literature. *Hamlet* is not necessarily a greater work than *Phèdre*, but Shakespeare is more widely known than Racine. Such a work as *The Western Canon* suggests that an international canon might emerge on the basis of what is available in English. What I see as a danger is that such a canon of literature in English may create an illusion that could make us forget about important discontinuities in culture.

At this point let me make a personal remark. As a member of the International Comparative Literature Association, I have published numerous articles in English in the last decades. In 2001, a collection of my essays came out in English. I am reluctant to write in English because I can express myself in Hungarian with much more ease. Yet, I have never tried to translate any of my works published in Hungarian, since these were written with a Hungarian public in mind. The difference is one of expectations. What may interest American readers might be redundant for Hungarians and vice versa. The continuity of the literature written in my native language as it has been described by the scholars of earlier generations seems incompatible with the canonical continuity of Western culture.

The transformation of nation states may have not only economic and political but also cultural consequences. It is easier to preach the principle of "think global, act local" than to put it into practice. Those who believe that economic integration, the free circulation of capital and merchandise is possible without cultural integration are naïve. One of the possible consequences of the free circulation of European citizens will be the rise of bilingualism. In the past, literature was often taken as a manifestation of national identity. In the future, the survival of some national cultures may depend on how far their products can be translated into English and other languages of large distribution. In cultural terms the enlargement of the European Union cannot be reduced to the admission of new states; the conditions of a dialogue need to be established.

There is a danger that an international canon may become institutionalized on the basis of accessibility. Works that are not read do not exist, yet readable works are not necessarily valuable. At the beginning of 2002 I was commissioned to write a new history of Hungarian literature. For my predecessors religion, national identity, or progress had been the guiding principle that guaranteed the continuity of the narrative, a kind of "first choice" that coloured all the subsequent decisions on selection. Since these principles have become questionable, it seems necessary to look for some other starting hypothesis.

Both nation and literature are vulnerable to historic changes. I am not sure we can speak of nations before the rise of the bourgeoisie. In any case, in a certain period literature had been the embodiment of national identity both as its creator and as its product. To believe that nation and literature are known and

homogeneous entities and as such can guarantee historical continuity is as serious an error as believing in a single human history. Let us not forget that the ideal of universal history was often linked to totalitarian régimes. The division of Jerusalem may be paradigmatic of the division of our postcolonial, post-communist, and postmodern world. By writing a poem, play, novel, or scholarly work, an author signs a contract with a community. A historian's task ("Aufgabe") is to examine the transformations of this contract as historical discontinuities. Globalization will inevitably change the status of nation, language, and literature. One may not exclude the possibility that some national cultures may disappear in the future. More and more works probe the often faint borderline that is supposed to divide translation from original, canonical high art from popular culture, and literature from almost everything else. We cannot ignore these changes even if the literary histories we produce will be temporary and fragmented. The work entitled *A New History of French Literature* edited by David Hollier (1989) may exemplify such shortcomings.

In the past, comparative literary history was inspired by the ideal of a succession of international currents. This approach made canonical works resemble growths from different branches on the same tree. Scholars often ignored every work that did not seem to be part of some movement and they were inspired by a clear-cut distinction between innovative and imitative cultures. The spokesmen of polysystem theory, for example, draw a line between central and marginal literatures. The preconception underlying such a distinction – the idea that cultures can be described in terms of progress ("Fortschritt") and conservatism ("Bewahren"), catching up and delay, so that less developed literatures re-enact the impulses of their more advanced counterparts and have to rely on translations – needs to be re-examined in the same way as the biological assumptions that lie behind the evolutionary ideal of spiritual growth. The idea that local values are constitutive for historical knowledge cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. Linear arrangement based on the idea of an irreversible temporal process has to be replaced by a multi-layered analysis of the superposition and interference of conflicting trends. Because of the complexity of the interrelations between different scales ("échelles"), large-scale ("longue durée") processes can be counterpointed by microhistories, long-term sequences by short and medium structures. The different dimensions are incommensurable. I would call them scales of interpretation rather than "échelles de description", a term used by Ricoeur, although I accept his argument that "En changeant d'échelle, on ne voit pas les mêmes choses en plus grand ou en plus petit (...). On voit des choses différentes" (2000:270).

Broadly speaking, discontinuity is linked to duration and causality; it can be perceived by the reader of a literary history when phenomena characterized as novelty (originality) or contradiction (reaction) are introduced, or when narrative continuity is disrupted by some reference to the contemporaneity of the

noncontemporaneous or the noncontemporaneousness of simultaneous events, or by some comparison with what is distant in a temporal or spatial sense. However, distance from the past and debts to predecessors or other cultures are matters of narrative perspective. Cultural dialogue is not a one-way street. What seems innovative from one angle may prove to be conservative in another context. Most, if not all, texts can be read as "original" works or "translations". Because of such contradictions, teleology and causality need to be supplemented by chance, cumulative and irreversible time by different, even conflicting periodizations that do not exclude cyclic, static, and regressive temporality. The Enlightenment ideal of the acceleration of time is a secularized version of the Christian ideal of the compression of time and as such cannot be of universal legitimacy. Not only continuity but even direction can be made questionable. If works are not viewed as autonomous entities but in terms of a history of their reception, nation, language, and literature will appear as concepts asking for constant revision. Literary history has to be a theoretically oriented, self-questioning discipline. Old and new, identity and difference, sameness and otherness, original and translation, remembering and forgetting, continuity and discontinuity are all matters of narrative perspective.

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