

# NATIONAL LITERATURES IN THE AGE OF GLOBALISATION

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It has been suggested that literary history focused on reception can resolve the tension between aesthetic and historical criteria, especially if we concede that the concept of originality is deeply unstable and has both historical and aesthetic implications. The turn from impact to reception can be seen as a consequence of the fact that the ideal of the immanence of the self-contained work of art has fallen into disrepute. It is quite possible that a national literature does not lend itself as a subject to narrative history, just as the identity of an author's output or the continuity of the history of a genre can be questioned.

**Keywords:** history of literature, globalisation, national identity, multiculturalism, organism model, postcolonialism, reception theory

“A national literature comes to consciousness at the stage at which any young writer must be aware of several generations of writers behind him, in his own country and language, and amongst these generations several writers generally acknowledged to be of the great. (...) He will recognize the common ancestry, but needn't necessarily like his relatives.”

*(Eliot 1965, 56.)*

Today a literary historian cannot pretend to be an omniscient observer recounting “wie es wirklich gewesen ist;” instead he may be inclined to present an occurrence from several different perspectives that may at times contradict rather than complement one another. There are no “raw” facts in literary history, just as there are no transparent interpretations. Any fact transmitted by an historian already implies certain theoretical presuppositions. Those who believe that historical facts or literary texts speak for themselves are simply biased without knowing it. They do not realize that literary history is a self-reflective discipline and an act of strategic fictionalising.

My intention is to discuss the role of some keywords used by literary historians. Instead of offering a systematic investigation, I wish to focus on biographical, national, comparative, evolutionist and reception-oriented research. It might be necessary to look for new keywords even if no means has been discovered for getting rid of the old ones.

Except for the works of two or three major authors, an earlier Hungarian text is read primarily as a specimen of medieval, renaissance, or Baroque culture, while books written on nineteenth-century literature are often read for the biographical keys they can supply to the "canonical" works. Historians of literature were always affected by public opinion. In the discussion of texts written in earlier centuries scholars were led primarily by an antiquarian interest that inspired them to search for historical monuments. By contrast, in the case of works composed in more recent periods, the cult of genius often made them view texts as fragments of autobiography. This conception, inspired by a vitalist approach to personality, led to the idea that Petőfi and Ady were the most important Hungarian authors of the last two centuries and to the rise of the biographical monograph as a genre. While it should be given its historical due as an important factor influencing the attitude of generations of readers, recognition of the historical legitimacy of the genre should not be mistaken for a demand for its restoration. The study of the cult of Petőfi or Ady cannot be substituted for the analysis of the changing reception of their works. One may even ask if the popularity of the biographical approach was not responsible for the emphasis on these two poets at the expense of Vörösmarty, a Romantic of international magnitude, János Arany, whose place is still undefined in comparative terms, or Babits and Kosztolányi, authors whose activity was deeply rooted in the spiritual atmosphere of the early decades of the twentieth century.

One of the difficulties for historians is how to distinguish value-judgments from arbitrary articles of faith. The distinction between factual information and value-judgments is untenable. We never make unpreconceived judgments, but are always confirming or rejecting received opinion, whether consciously or unconsciously. In the nineteenth century the idea of national identity served as a criterion for separating the essential from the negligible. In histories of national literatures the works have been approached almost exclusively from a point of view that has emphasized what is nationally distinctive rather than what is common to several nations. To bridge the gap between national and comparative literary history is easier said than done. A comparative assessment of the literatures in languages of large distribution is quite different from that of the so-called minor literatures. A Hungarian comparatist may be tempted to focus on values that are widely accepted as central to his native culture but are hardly known to the international public. For the adherents of national historiography it is difficult to resist the temptation to correct international judgment. While it is certainly true that

commentaries on the less accessible literatures may be based on superficial evidence – a striking example of this is René Wellek's essay on the Baroque containing a reference to the work of Endre Angyal, a Hungarian scholar of negligible significance (Wellek 1963, 116, 120) – it would be a mistake to dismiss international reception as merely a bunch of pitiable errors. The interests of a foreign audience may differ from those of a native public. Let me use a recent example to illustrate my point.

In 2002 Imre Kertész was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. At the time this happened, his works had been sold in more copies in Germany than in Hungary. Several explanations have been offered. None of them seems to be convincing. Mine would be based on the idea of a discrepancy between national and international perspectives due to different degrees of translatability. The works of Péter Esterházy are arguably more significant achievements of verbal art but they are deeply rooted in Hungarian history. Their emphasis on the historical connotations and semantic aspects of the signifier make them less translatable than *Fateless*, the first and possibly best novel by Kertész, which is becoming an integral part of the slowly emerging international canon of holocaust literature. Kertész has a double identity: history forced him to see himself as belonging both to "us" and to the "other," and his language reflects this.

Before I pass to what could be regarded as the common denominator of the literary histories with biographical and national orientations, I wish to point to the uncertainty of the survival of the national paradigm. In the 1990s numerous publications tried to warn that the world stood culturally in great danger of Americanisation. The result may be eroded historicity, a danger predicted in *The Sense of the Past* (1917), an unfinished novel by Henry James about America's isolation from history. If this hypothesis is correct, the globalisation of the economy may involve denationalisation and the effacement of local cultures. "It does not matter where I am so long as I have a computer connected to the Internet," Hillis Miller wrote in a book in which he tried to assess the changes in literary study in an age of globalisation (Miller 1999, 17). Integration into the global economy at the expense of the enhancement of national economies, the internationalisation of production, marketing, and consumption, the dramatic increase in the number of supranational state interactions, and the development of the global media may involve cultural consequences. They may lead to a breakdown in the spatial separation of cultures and to the removal of all traces of the archaic. If the forces of global economy collapse the Second and Third Worlds into the First, so that the world draws more tightly together into a single system, some cultures may lose their relative autonomy, their otherness. As one of the American spokesmen of globalisation argues: "A new *kind* of imagined community has been created, an electronically mediated sort that is fundamentally transnational, qualitatively different from Benedict Anderson's print-based national form" (Buell 1994, 313).

The hypothesis concerning such a process can be supported by the fact that for Koreans Japanisation might be a more immediate cultural threat than Americanisation, as Russianisation for Estonia, or Indianisation for Shri Lankans.

Economic globalisation may go together with the disappearance of historicity, collective memory, the sense of the past, and the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous (the anachronistic). National differences may be replaced by such other kinds of affiliations and identity positions as gender, or interest groups that are not territorialised. I do not want to rush to any judgment. All I wish to say is that ideas on cultural imperialism are widespread. Paul Ricoeur and Clifford Geertz are just the most well-known among the numerous scholars who are afraid that post-capitalist infrastructure will shape the mind of people belonging to different communities to a single pattern. The new communication technologies are transforming culture. The use of electronic media leaves less time for reading. The displacement from the book age to the hypertext age may go together with a new process of canon formation.

Of course, the preexisting purity of local cultures is an illusion; the subjection of one culture to another is as old as history. The question is whether the formation of a media-bound global culture means that a new era is unveiling itself, a period in which the ideal of a bounded national culture becomes obsolete, and post-modern multiculturalism seems to burst apart national frames, partly because of what could be called a new migration. The conclusion Sándor Márai (1900–1989) drew from his own experience is that a writer of the diaspora is tempted to view the literature of his/her native language through the eyes of the adopted country. Some writers and historians who fled to the West after the Communist takeover came to regard the Eastern half of Europe as a defective copy of the Western world, just as Britain or France considered India or Algeria to be undeveloped equivalents of the Western world. Deterritorialisation meant falsification, Márai argued in his diary. Members of diasporas or immigrants run the risk of becoming labilely bicultural. The question arises if the history of a writer who spent most of his life in exile and the history of his/her homeland are two sides of the same history.

Márai's assumption, expressed in his poem *A Funeral Sermon* (composed in 1950), that those who live in exile fall between two stools is a far cry from the characterization of the transnational intellectuals given by György Konrád in his *Antipolitics*, an essay published in English translation in 1984. Márai's works may also serve as a reminder that those who argue that the "kernel of 'native' culture becomes more and more like unwrapping an onion: one finds relationships (global, regional) beneath relationships, not a hard, definitive, genuinely local core" (Buell 1994, 40) may forget that language, a *sine qua non* of literature, creates serious problems for globalisation. Because of these difficulties, the future of national cultures will continue to be a vexing problem for a wide spectrum of liter-

ary historians, a charged point of contention between the supporters and detractors of 'mondialisation'.

A historian, whether biography-, nation-, or comparison-oriented, must resort to the organism model – grounded on the laws of origin, growth, and decline – before certain works can begin to appear as stages in an evolution. The analogy between the growth of organisms and the development of the arts goes back to Aristotle's account of the history of tragedy that reached its terminal point in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, a work accorded canonical status. The concept of a paradigm shift or qualitative leap presupposes the existence of continuity. Juxtaposing blocks is one extreme, gradualism is another. Both can be seen as versions of a plot of genealogical identity and inheritance.

Many works have been transformed from functional or practical pieces into autonomous works. The word "autonomous" is equivocal; it signifies the absolving of literature from the obligation to fulfill so-called extra-literary functions. "Autonomous literature" may be an ideal type that is somewhat comparable to what Richard Wagner called "absolute music." In the Middle Ages the degree of motivation was never as significant as is suggested by histories based on Romantic precepts. It would be an anachronism to speak of epigonism in the literature of the fourteenth century.

Directly or indirectly, most literary histories were written under the influence of Giorgio Vasari's celebrated work *Le vite de' piu eccelenti pittori, scultori ed architettori*. What needs to be remembered is that while it is possible to argue that the mimetic skill of drawing or painting on a flat surface developed in the course of generations, no similar basis for a teleological treatment of literature can be discovered. In verbal art evolutionary models have proved to be of more questionable legitimacy. In result, it is wiser to be reluctant to group the modes of representations in some ascending scale.

Such changes as the rise of free verse or the growing prominence of interior monologue are commonly regarded as the signs of literary progress. Such teleological processes, however, can be further complicated and partially undermined by other developments. Originality is not an intrinsic quality of the object itself. What may seem progressive from one angle may turn out to be backward-looking from another perspective. The opposition conservative – modern needs to be broken down and polarising language dropped. Experimentation in one direction is often purchased by the loss of innovation in another. The orchestration of *La Symphonie phantastique* could be called innovative in comparison with that of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. If you focus on thematic development, the work by Berlioz could be called not only far less sophisticated but even retrograde. Such ambiguities need to be taken seriously especially since interpretive perspective is part of history. If the French poetry of the 1880s is examined from the perspective of the development of free verse, not Mallarmé but Gustave Kahn can be called a

representative of the avant-garde. If the later evolution of Anglo-American verse is the starting-point, Jules Laforgue merits more attention than the author of *Un coup de dés*. The works of László Ungvárnémeti Tóth (1788–1820), a Hungarian poet who showed no interest in the experimentation associated with Romanticism and composed verse in Greek as well as in Hungarian, were rediscovered in the middle of the twentieth century by Sándor Weöres, an author who anticipated Postmodernism. Both perspectives belong to the history of reception: in one sense each offers an alternative to the other, but there is also a stage at which one approach is transformed into the other. The complex relations between originality and tradition destabilize binary oppositions. It is not that the distinction is useless, but new and old are always contingent, and if we treat them as stable and given entities, we risk missing the actual reception of works of art.

In an age of postcolonialism we may profit from non-Western cultures and learn to refuse to think in terms of clearly opposed, exclusive Cartesian dichotomies. As the *Bhagavan Gita* says, “Who dares to see action in inaction / and inaction in action / is wise.” One criterion of understanding may be to see conservatism in the avant-garde and vice versa. New and old are not raw facts but matters of interpretation. Such systems of binary opposites yield to a more complex awareness; each term is shaped by and helps shape the other. On the innovative-traditional boundary, the “maybes” are multiplying especially if we leave the literatures in languages of large distribution. Needless to say, this argument is based on the assumption that the size of a community is the only possible ground for arranging the languages of the world in an ascending scale, a preconception difficult to justify or refute.

One of the obstacles to the integration of less accessible literatures into the international canon is the belief in the unity of the *Zeitgeist* in every artistic manifestation of an age, a thesis inherited from *Geistesgeschichte*. Even some of the volumes in the series called *A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* may be somewhat vulnerable in this respect. The volume on Symbolism, for instance, contains chapters on poets who may be traditionally associated with that movement, although their works have almost nothing in common with the poetics of Mallarmé and his circle, which serves as a starting point in the introductory part of the volume. The contradiction is undeniable: on the one hand, it is assumed that what Mallarmé represented was not a French but an international movement; on the other, this paradigm proved to be inapplicable to the works by authors who did not work in France. A fear of discordant overabundance may inspire historians to force ready-made patterns on incompatible literary phenomena. The construction of an ideal type homogenises diversity into a single category.

Fredric Jameson’s evolutionary model, the cultural periodization of the stages of realism, modernism, and postmodernism, is directly modeled on a Marxian interpretation of technological and economic progress. No Marxian inspiration can

be detected in the distinctions Jauss made in his later essays, or in Ernő Kulcsár Szabó's idea of a succession of four stages: classical modernism, avant-garde, late and postmodernism. Kulcsár Szabó's periodization is the only one to have emerged so far in Hungarian literary history since the collapse of the so-called Second World. Its links with the evolutionist tradition may not be perceptible at first sight, but his well-argued interpretation of postmodernism has striking similarities with Jameson's views on postmodernism as the culture of a de-historicised present and the manifestation of a multinational consumer capitalism that is inseparable from the expansion of capital into hitherto uncommodified areas and the rise of the media and the advertising industry. In fact, the global interactiveness of what is sometimes called information society can be foregrounded as the cause of the master or totalizing narrative of evolution. The history of reception shows that the beautiful and the original are not natural or autonomous qualities but fabrications and, as such, fragile achievements, constructions of specific social worlds.

It has been suggested that literary history focused on reception can resolve the tension between aesthetic and historical criteria, especially if we concede that the concept of originality is deeply unstable and has both historical and aesthetic implications. The turn from impact (*Wirkung*) to reception can be seen as a consequence of the fact that the ideal of the immanence of the self-contained work of art has fallen into disrepute. In the history of recording music this shift of emphasis corresponded to the growing emphasis on the value of live recordings. It is certainly true that norms of interpretation shifted through general artistic and intellectual movements. The reaction to the Romantic emphasis on personal involvement in interpretation derived from aesthetic concerns that prevailed in the intellectual climate of the years following both world wars. Edwin Fischer numbered Hindemith, Stravinsky, and Toscanini among those who tried to purify musical interpretation of Romantic subjectivism (Fischer 1956, 106); Schönberg suggested that the "rigidity of feeling" that characterized impersonal interpretation had something to do with the influence of the "stiff, inflexible meter" of American jazz (Schönberg 1975, 320). A link could be made between the adherents of the ideal of "Werk-" or rather "Notentreue" (the thesis that the past has to be approached "on its own term", and that interpretation can be securely based on the value-neutral accumulation of objective facts) and the neo-classicists and the spokesmen of "neue Sachlichkeit" of the 1920s or those structuralists of the 1950s and 60s who insisted on the "scientific" spirit of textual analysis. The history of the interpretations of Shakespeare's plays suggests that in the more distant past more performer or interpreter freedom was expected than has been allowed in the twentieth century, since the interpreter often played a large part in the process of composition.

To believe in a "Fassung letzter Hand" and to insist on the "original" meaning of a work of art is to fear exposure to history. Translations, adaptations, Renais-

sance plays, numerous works by Honoré de Balzac, Henry James, Marcel Proust, Dezső Kosztolányi, and others can remind us of the heterotextuality of the work of art; the reader must take over much of the responsibility of the editor, sifting through the various versions. It would be misleading to associate the questionable identity of the literary work with any given historical period. Such works as *King Lear*, *Le chef d'oeuvre inconnu*, *The Portrait of a Lady*, or *A la recherche du temps perdu* prove the interrelations between re-writing and re-reading.

As a theoretician of historically informed interpretation argues, the idea that understanding is restoration “is *anti*-historical, assuming as it does that there are essences in artistic production and reception that are entirely unaffected by the passing of time and place” (Butt 2002, 54). Interpretation always means reading under certain conditions. As new historicists maintain, the literary historians’ goal is to examine “how texts might have affected hypothetical readers at different times and places, sometimes supplementing their accounts with other kinds of historical evidence. And their speculations have the same status, and are subject to the same rules of evidence, as any other historical speculation” (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2001, 170).

A history of literature focused on reception may be handicapped by the paucity of the documents available. What has survived of earlier interpretive styles is impossible even to begin to speculate. Since the manner in which individuals, groups, or communities receive literary works is seldom documented, modes of interpretation cannot be adequately reconstructed without serious difficulties. The historian has to rely on functional relationships between conventional patterns of perception, aesthetic, ethical, ideological, and political norms, and the institutions of society. Since it is scarcely conceivable how an historian could ever succeed in reconstructing a bygone event, the complex interaction of text, interpretation, and reception needs to be re-created.

My tentative proposition for the literary historian is to offer a teleology and at the same time half withdraw it, to propagate not one but two attitudes. In contrast to those who tend to draw their examples from what is a so-called established literary canon, as historians we need to ask ourselves how we can select those textual traces that have played a significant role in culture. Artistic greatness can hardly exist without historical impact.

It is quite possible that a national literature does not lend itself as a subject to narrative history, just as the identity of an author’s output or the continuity of the history of a genre can be questioned. “Die Identität des Werkes,” Dahlhaus wrote, “ist demnach in der Kontinuität der Wirkungsgeschichte und in dem Ziel einer vollendeten Interpretation, dem sie zustrebt und dem sie naehert” (Dahlhaus 1977, 246). In my mind there can be no such “complete and perfect interpretation” because understanding is by definition partial. All teleologies are based on an established canon, and history works against such an ideal. Even Gombrich, a firm



supporter of canonicity, admitted in his last book that a transition could be made “from an evolutionist view of the history of art to a relativist conception that sees every phase as an example of a particular stylistic mode – later art, in other words, is not better than the earlier phase, it is only different” (Gombrich 2002, 29). Besides, the firmly rooted idea that literature in its highest forms consists of texts with art character can be challenged as being outmoded, as being a relic of structuralism. As Mallarmé noted, as early as 1891, “dans une société sans stabilité, sans unité, il ne peut se créer d’art stable, d’art définitif” (Mallarmé 1945, 866).

A social event, belonging to the past as well as to the present, rather than a work is the central category of literary history. Literary processes have primacy over texts, since the historian’s goal is to gain insights into the relation of an aesthetic form to the life-world of the people to which it belongs. If the subject of literary history is an event, a communicative process, a complex of functional relationships between texts and their reception, dates of composition need to be supplemented by dates of greatest influence or effect. As Koselleck has pointed out, it is possible to speak of the non-contemporaneity of the contemporaneous. There may be contesting rhythms and different levels, and the overlapping tempos cannot be reduced to a common underlying metre. Historical events are of various durations and the historian has to cope with conflicting rhythms and overlapping, perhaps even incompatible structures. We cannot do without teleology but we need to consider several possible teleologies that are at variance with each other.

Original works represent discontinuity as well as continuity. In a sense, each important work marks a new beginning.

Although it is difficult to pay attention to conflicting demands, history needs to be supplemented by counterhistories, arguments on innovation by counterarguments, imaginary projections by counterprojections. It seems that literary texts can be viewed less as finished entities standing outside time than as works shaped by re-creative readers. As a musicologist wrote in a recent book on interpretation, “the meanings of works of art do not deal with timeless realities, nor are they exclusively the result of a creator’s thought and conscious, or even unconscious intentions, but may be apprehended differently at different times, in different circumstances by different people” (Day 2000, 229). If we regard works of art as living things, we have to write literary history as a history of changing interpretations. Rewriting literary history is not reading between the lines, searching for an intention that is not expressed. It is rather writing in the margins, acknowledging the supplementary status of interpretation, always revealing more margins to be filled.

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