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ON THE USES AND LIMITS OF MULTICULTURALISM

Mihály Szegedy-Maszák

HJEAS

One of the ambiguities of the eighteenth century is that it was the period in which Europe reached maturity in historical understanding and turned to mononationalism in culture. The complex relations between these two facts proved to have far-reaching consequences for later developments. Jean-Jacques Rousseau and others insisted that the role to be played by cultural products was "de renforcer le caractère national" (Rousseau 137), and Herder gave special emphasis to the binary opposition between organic and imitative culture. Historians, philosophers, and writers inspired by their ideas compared the fate of a nation to a teleological process. Having the confidence that a certain pattern could be discerned in the development of a nation, they told a highly constructed story in the form of an edifying tale, explaining the essence of a national literature by a hypostatized national psychology.

As I have argued elsewhere, in the present age the Romantic concept of national character can no longer be regarded as a narrative paradigm in what is loosely called the Western world (Borner). It has become customary to speak of multiculturalism and global citizenship. In 1967 Heidegger characterized modern art in the following way: "Ihre Werke entspringen nicht mehr den prägenden Grenzen einer Welt des Volkhaften und Nationalen. Sie gehören in die Universalität der Weltzivilisation" ("Die Herkunft der Kunst" 140). Yet the emergence of new cultures in Africa, Asia, or Canada, as well as the cult of a search for roots and the rise of ethnic history in the United States, suggest that it may be too early to speak of globalization. Furthermore, as a result of the collapse of the Warsaw Pact and the decline of the international Communist movement, more national cultures seem to be active in Europe today than ever before. In view of this, it seems preferable to accept a third option, different from both a nostalgic return to a Humboldtian view of culture as expression of national identity and a utopian form of universalism. Such an intermediate and rather self-contradictory position was taken by Jacques Derrida when he gave the following definition at a conference on European identity: "l'histoire d'une culture suppose sans doute un cap identifiable, un *telos* vers lequel le mouvement, la mémoire et la promesse, l'identité, fut-ce comme différence à soi, rêve de se rassembler" (*L'autre cap* 22-23).

How can we arrive at a legitimate evaluation of different cultures? In a postcolonial age this question seems to be very difficult. On the one hand, the strict hierarchy inherited from a Eurocentric past has to be avoided; on the other hand, it is hardly deniable that cultural movements tend to establish centres of

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their own. It would be futile to deny that most of the initiatives associated with the Enlightenment had originated in Britain, France, and Germany, just as most people would admit that between the middle of the eighteenth century and the 1820s the best music was composed by Gluck, Joseph Haydn, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Beethoven, and Franz Schubert. Yet the opposition between centre and periphery may imply a strictly linear view of history and even a kind of cultural imperialism. The importance of a nineteenth- or twentieth-century painting is often judged in terms of a teleological process leading from Classicism to Romanticism, Impressionism, Postimpressionism, the Avant-garde, and Postmodernism. Multiculturalism may offer an alternative that would make it possible to see different traditions. From such a perspective, doubts could be raised about the legitimacy of the overwhelming consensus that between 1870 and 1940 Paris was the centre for the visual arts, whereas after 1940 it was New York.

In any case, it is difficult to speak about peripheral cultures from a centre. To what extent can it be taken for granted that the substance of generic or historical concepts is the same when applied to cultures other than those in which their definition had been originally developed? Is it justifiable, for instance, to speak about elegies in old Chinese literature? (See Tōkei.) Does it help any reader understand the works of Endre Ady, Hungarian poet and publicist, if he is called a Symbolist, and is it possible to speak of Postmodernism in countries that have not experienced the advantages and disadvantages of a consumer society? The danger is that the hermeneutic process is stopped too early and too easily when the unfamiliar is quickly reduced to the familiar. The so-called minor cultures are often treated as imperfect replicas; their history is viewed in terms of derivation and *décalage*, displacement in time and space.

It seems somewhat problematic conceptually to deduce progress or delay or to define the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous unless you can locate a centre with absolute certainty. The assumption that a culture is either central or marginal is closely related to the Classicist legacy—the manners of the court are opposed to those of the provinces—and it is by no means obvious that this ideal can be used in the interpretation of the cultures of the last two centuries. If the impersonal and agnostic Mallarmé is considered to be the crucial figure of Symbolism, it may seem doubtful whether a writer who used not only discursive prose but also verse as an instrument of political message can be associated with this movement. When a Hungarian is asked about Symbolism in his literature, he may try to "sell" Ady as a representative of that movement and thereby avoid the nominalist-realist debate, but the question remains unanswered whether the concept of Symbolism—closely tied to a rejection of both self-expression and didacticism—is helpful in understanding Ady's egotistical sublime, political Messianism, or Calvinism. The interpretation may be so reductive that it can hardly be called a form of historical understanding. In a similar way, it is possible to have reservations about the legitimacy of calling the Postmodern a type of writing which affirms Christian values.

The dilemma of cosmopolitanism versus provincialism, like the tension between the legacies of universalism and relativism, cannot be regarded as outmoded. Colonialism has taught us that if the distance between two cultures is too great, no merging of horizons seems possible. As Goethe wrote to Herder in

1796: "Die Fremde hat ein fremdes Leben, und wir können es uns nicht zu eigen machen, wenn es uns gleich als Gästen gefällt" (qtd. in Wierlacher 59).

The historical nature of understanding is closely related to the intertextual nature of meaning and may be the reason why dialogue between cultures is not a matter of good intentions. You cannot enter a tradition, you have to stand in it. "Traditions ist nichts, was Einer lernen kann, ist nichts ein Faden, den aufnehmen kann, wenn es ihm gefällt; so wenig, wie es möglich ist, sich die eigenen Ahnen auszusuchen" (Wittgenstein 76). *Bel canto* singing is incompatible with Wagnerian style. There are limits to multicultural understanding ("Rezeptionsschwelle"), just as there are different degrees of translatability, depending on the distance between the source and the target language.

Displaced natives and refugees are always exposed to multicultural influence. A special category is represented by expatriates who decide to leave a homeland which they regard as provincial. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Americans from Henry James and Edith Wharton to Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot settled in Europe, because they missed high culture in the New World. Painters and sculptors moved to Paris, because they viewed it as the place where visual artists were validated, certified, accredited. In many of these cases the interaction of different cultures led to greater complexity of meaning. Yet it would be a mistake to ignore the risks of *dépaysement*. The French poems of T. S. Eliot are generally considered to be mediocre, the films Fritz Lang made in America are inferior to those he directed in Germany, the later works of Stravinsky are less innovative than the three ballets of his early "Russian" period, and a decline of integrity has been ascribed to the last compositions of Bartók. When Pierre Boulez detected "un piétinement" and "trop de clichés dans l'écriture et la construction" in such a work as the *Concerto for Orchestra* (first performed in Boston in December 1944), he suggested that the composer's attempt to meet the demands of the American public proved to be self-destructive (Boulez 304).

It is easier to condemn ethnocentrism and cultural imperialism than to have a more than superficial knowledge of other cultures. While no legitimate interpretation of literature can be given by scholars whose reading is limited to texts in one language, some works of verbal art—especially those in which ambiguity and polyvalence can be traced back to the signifier, or in which connotations are based on etymology—can be understood only in the original by those who have a full command of the language in a very broad sense, including the history of the language. Interpretive communities and practices cannot exist without an intimate knowledge of certain conventions. The relative absence of great orchestral conductors in the late twentieth century, for example, may suggest that interpretive traditions built up gradually by several generations may die out if radical changes occur in the cultural climate.

A scholar's awareness of the limitations of his or her knowledge of other cultures may lead to the belief that he or she can develop historically relevant interpretations only of the literature written in the scholar's mother tongue. It is only in such cases that a true reading occurs or takes place—in the sense that the words "Es ereignet sich aber das Wahre," taken from Hölderlin's late hymn *Mnemosyne*, have been applied to interpretation (de Man 221).

One of the advantages of multiculturalism is that it points to the provincial nature of monolithic concepts of *Weltgeschichte*. The works György Lukács wrote in his middle period, between the two world wars, and his frequent use of the labels "progressive" and "reactionary," might serve as a warning that *Weltgeschichte* may involve a uniform idea of teleology that makes cultural dialogue impossible and may give rise to totalitarian consequences. The interpretation of *Epochenschwelle* as developed by Hans Blumenberg, Reinhart Koselleck, and Hans Robert Jauß is incomparably more sophisticated, but even this concept implies a universalism that may relegate some cultures to the periphery. Nor can I accept the argument made by some of the critics of these universalist ideas. I would say tentatively and with great respect for those who use the term that it is somewhat misleading to speak of Eurocentrism. While it is important to remember that European imperialism has certainly distorted the understanding of the legacy of mankind, it is a dangerous temptation to ignore the cultural diversity of Europe.

In the first half of the twentieth century there were two types of intellectuals who introduced the concept of multiculturalism. Some ventured into this field out of intellectual curiosity—Western specialists of Oriental languages are obvious examples—while others were forced to insist on dialogue between different cultures by the vagaries of fate or the tragedies of history. Paul Celan, a Jewish poet born in Bukovina, decided to write in the language of the people whose politicians had sent him to a death camp, yet he combined the language of Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and Heidegger with Hebrew and Yiddish. A similar dialogism is exemplified by the activity of Vladimir Nabokov. In the 1920s he started his career as an avant-garde novelist and poet in exile. Because of the limited chances for a writer with a small public consisting of Russian émigrés, he had to switch to the English language in middle age, during World War II. The next decade brought him international success, and by the 1960s his works were regarded as an epitome of multiculturalism. *Speak, Memory* (1966) and *Invitation of a Beak* (1969) were written about pre-revolutionary Russia in English by a writer living in Switzerland. In 1967 he gave the following answer to the question as to whether he had any conspicuous flaw as a writer:

The absence of a natural vocabulary. . . . Of the two instruments in my possession, one—my native tongue—I can no longer use, and this is not only because I lack a Russian audience, but also because the excitement of verbal adventure in the Russian medium had faded away gradually after I turned to English in 1940. My English, this second instrument I have always had, is however a stiffish, artificial thing, which may be all right for describing a sunset or an insect, but which cannot conceal poverty of syntax and paucity of domestic diction when I need the shortest road between warehouse and shop. An old Rolls Royce is not always preferable to a plain jeep. (110)

Of course, I would accept the view that comparative literature has legitimacy only if there are degrees of translatability. It is more possible to read *Bleak House* in translation than *Atemkristall*, a sequence of short and cryptic

lyrics by Celan. However tempting the universalism of some Enlightenment thinkers is, the Romantics may remind us that literary works are language-dependent. In the early twentieth century there were avant-garde journals in most parts of Europe and in America which aimed at the creation of an international literary climate. My guess is that these illusions of Valéry Larbaud, Ivan Goll, and Lajos Kassák have been lost by now. While in music and possibly even in the visual arts it is easier to speak of an international canon, in literature there are no institutions that are comparable to concert halls or museums. There exists a public which can appreciate equally the works of Hokusai and Giovanni di Paolo, Lassus and Cage, but it would be difficult to find many readers with a historical understanding of the poetry of both Tu Fu and Shakespeare. I admire and enjoy *The Dream of the Red Chamber* more than many European or American novels, but I cannot claim to be able to develop a historical interpretation of this work.

The self-contradiction in Derrida's definition—culture as identity and *différance*—suggests that history is knowledge of alien experience, yet it is also constituted by memory. "Zuletzt kann niemand aus den Dingen, die Bücher eingerechnet, mehr heraushören, als er bereits weiss," wrote Nietzsche (297-98), and one of the possible implications of his remark is that if the distance between the text and the reader is too great, no continuity, ellipsis, or disruption of tradition can be felt and no historical understanding seems possible. It may be easier to learn about the place of a text in history than to acquire a sense of history in that text. "Durch sein Gedicht stiftet der Dichter Gedächtnis," says Gadamer (*Wer bin Ich* 131). The historical nature of understanding is closely related to the intertextual character of meaning and may be the main reason why there are limits to the fruitfulness of creative misinterpretation. When reading in Hungarian, I can have an awareness of intertextuality that is natural, almost instinctive, whereas if I read Celan, my memories of Hölderlin and Rilke will depend on my studies which relate to ideas about the text rather than to the text itself. While perusing Keats or Ashbery, Milton and Stevens are not in my ear, so I am at a disadvantage in comparison with a native speaker who has a kind of organic contact with texts in that language and therefore finds it less difficult to sense the contest that takes place between texts in English. If you know more, you can afford to be more flexible, relaxed, and spontaneous in your reading, whereas if you know less, your response might be somewhat stiff and unoriginal. It is not difficult to see a failure of historical understanding in the way the verse of Poe was read by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, and Valéry. Historically relevant interpretations have to be based on a sense of continuity and discontinuity in the history of a semiotic system, on some assessment of the relation between precursor and ephebe.

It is one thing to assert that "il n'y a pas de hors texte" (Derrida, *De la grammatologie* 227) because the inner/outer dichotomy has to be deconstructed, and quite a different one to question the existence of traditions of interpretation. The third *Brandenburg Concerto* as conducted by Furtwängler is interesting yet somewhat misleading, because Furtwängler ignored the basic rules of Baroque music making. His excuse was that the institutions of music-making had changed so radically in the nineteenth century that it seemed impossible to recreate eighteenth-century conditions in the twentieth. While the Romantic interpretive tradition made his reading of Bach at least partly justifiable, it would be difficult

to make such historical claim for Glenn Gould's recording of Beethoven's opus 57, which may shed more light on the Canadian pianist's idiosyncratic ideas about artistic flaws in the works composed by Beethoven in his middle period than on the "Appassionata" sonata. In his interpretation preserved in a 1967 CBS recording, the first movement ("Allegro assai") lasts 14 minutes and 57 seconds, in sharp contrast to the versions by Arthur Schnabel and Edwin Fischer, recorded for His Master's Voice in 1933 and 1935, in which the same movement lasts 8 minutes and 56 seconds and 8 minutes and 35 seconds, respectively. An excessively slow performance of an "Allegro" movement composed in the Classical sonata form may be compared to a "Nachdichtung" that is too free to be accepted as a translation. No hermeneutic dialogue is developed, no "Horizontverschmelzung" (Gadamer, *Wahrheit* 347, 401) occurs, and the primacy of self-understanding leads to arbitrary interpretation. Such cases may remind us that it is easier to insist on multiculturalism than to do justice to its requirements, since understanding is mediation rather than self-expression or contemplation.

If cultural relativism has some legitimacy in music, it plays an even more crucial role in the historical understanding of literature. Reading in one's mother tongue necessitates interpretive strategies different from those followed when reading in a foreign language or in translation. The international status and accessibility of a language undoubtedly affects the reception of literary works. English, French, German, Russian, Chinese, and Spanish are taught as second or "foreign" languages, which makes it easier to view the literature in these languages from the outside. In the case of Albanian, Estonian, or Mongolian, it would be difficult to speak of the perspective of the outsider, since the community of readers with Albanian, Estonian, or Mongolian as a second language must be rather small. Intercultural hermeneutics is a fascinating field, but in some cases it seems more applicable than in others. The range of reading positions in the case of an Estonian poem is so narrow in comparison with a novel originally written in English that the interpretive strategies might be radically different in the two cases, and it is virtually impossible to use the methods of *Wirkungsgeschichte* or *Rezeptionsästhetik* in the first case.

The world is extremely fragmented, and yet the canons, highly institutionalized and based on accessibility, are very rigid. In view of the increasing globalization and standardization—what some call Americanization—all countries have to address two issues. Since the humanities will no longer be centred in the study of national cultures, all the institutions of secondary and higher education need to be restructured. The rise of comparative studies will ask not only for a rearrangement of departments but also for publications which can meet the new demands. To make some progress, it would be advisable to deconstruct the opposition between Western and non-Western cultures and examine the distinction between "great" and "small" literatures. If it is true that Western poetics is mimetic, whereas the conception of literature characteristic of East Asia is "affective-expressive" (Miner 19), the task of comparative scholars is to attempt reinterpretations of both cultures from a dual perspective. The evaluation of individual literatures involves even more difficult problems, including the relations between aesthetic value and accessibility, or so-called high and popular culture. In any case, without a radical opening up of the international

canon, comparative literature research cannot justify its legitimacy in the future. Multiculturalism will change both research and teaching in ways that are hardly predictable at the present moment. One of the far-reaching consequences will be a rethinking of history, together with an undermining and possible restructuring of the cultural legacy of humankind.

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