

Literature in the Globalized World

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One of the areas in which the arising globalized world is breaking old boundaries is the area of the literature from other nations. At present, it is not possible for a writer or reader to live with only the literature from his own nation or from his own cultural circle. Both the creation and perception of a literary work occur against the background of the presence of literature from the entire world. This essay explores the relationship between the literature of different nations as well as the relationship to the Other and Otherness in general. To begin, I would like to elaborate on some of my personal memories. In the course of my life, as a result of political events, the relationship between my country and foreign-language literature has dramatically changed several times. I witnessed how, in the nineteen-sixties, doors were opened to modern world literature. This period coincided with the time of my adolescence, and I believe this period was crucial for forming my relationship with reading and writing. However, during the 1950s and 1970s, my country's relationship with foreign literature and literature in general was affected by the conviction of the ruling circles that the aim of a literary work was express a set of unchangeable ideas that had been recongnized once and for all. A writer should dress these ideas in new clothes (and usually even those clothes were not too novel). Writers unwilling to submit to this requirement were threatened with various penalties, ranging from a ban of publishing to imprisonment.

This concept of literature manifested itself in the relationship of my country with foreign literature. As the ruling party was the owner of this knowledge of what they called eternal ideas, it assumed the right to prescribe which literary works would be allowed to be translated

and published, and which ones should be prohibited. Fortunately, the Czechoslovakian literature from these periods was not limited to what was permitted by censors. In the 1950s, and especially in the 1970s, many novels, short stories, poems, and essays—both original works and translations—existed and were distributed as typescripts.

Of course, we find similar concepts of literary vehicles for prefixed ideas not only in the cultural politics of totalitarian regimes. The degradation of literary works as illustration of a singularly allowed ideology is an extreme form of understanding literature as the expression of ideas that are not born from the work of art itself but that are brought into the work from the outside. We must avow that this concept is supported by the familiar pleasant feeling that constitutes the common ground between ideology and kitsch—namely, the feeling we get whenever our own opinions and ideas are confirmed by another person.

However, we can also hear echoes of Hegel's conception of history in this approach to literature as a manifestation of an idea. As a matter of fact, these echoes reflect a rather shallow and uninventive reading of Hegel. This is not the only possible reading, nor is it the most profound or faithful interpretation of the original, inspiring Hegelian thought. History—and within it, history of literature and art—was for Hegel in his own words, *the Odyssey of the spirit*. However, Odysseus' wandering was neither the mere repetition of the same patterns, nor the mere searching for the one-time home that should appear in its familiar form at the end of the journey. His journey across the seas was a series of encounters, talks, and fights with strangers, gods, demons, and monsters living on islands, which happened to appear before his ships. It was a series of meetings with the Different and the Unknown. During these encounters, Odysseus' memories of his native island were melting away, while a new, unfamiliar, and disturbing, but also an infinitely appealing Ithaca gradually grew out of these adventures; a home that Odysseus had never known before, though perhaps he had always anticipated it in the depths of his soul.

In a purer form, this conception of history and literature as encounters with the Other and the Unknown can be found in the work of Hegel's friend of youth, Friedrich Hölderlin. He considers the literature as well as the life of nations as a dialogue between large geographic areas, such

as countries and continents, across whose mountains and rivers a poet is carried in flight by a Genius, as we can read in his poem *Patmos*. These areas meet one another, quarrel with each other, and reflect each other as part of this great continual dialogue between Greece and Germany, the Alps and the Mediterranean Sea, Southern France, Asia, and America. In Hölderlin's perspective, the experience of the individual and of the nation is similar to large rivers, such as the Rhine and the Danube, which shape their currents across the many countries that they flow through—in the sense that we first have to encounter all beings, all areas of the world, and perhaps the entire universe, to become ourselves.

In a more intimate form, the idea of finding ourselves while encountering the Other is reflected in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's work. According to Hofmannsthal, he who looks for his soul within himself cannot find it: we can only find our soul outside, and it is revealed to us by the things and places that we encounter in our daily ways. One more version of the Odyssey journey is found in Marcel Proust's work, which explores the unknown continent of everyday tiny feelings, perceptions, and gestures. Another version is found in the work of André Breton, who presents to us things as intersections between rows of analogies and mutual mirroring, which bind things and events together, remote in space and time, in a unique and magical network. I believe that it is possible to say that the adventure inherent in the modern art of the twentieth century was, in fact, an Odyssey comprising encounters with Otherness. In other words, it was a research expedition set out to explore the realm of the Unknown—regardless of whether the Unknown and Other were to be found in distant parts of the world or in our close proximity, separated from us only by the impenetrable curtain of our habitual patterns of perception and of language.

During the past few decades, we have been able to observe a change of how our relationship with the Other is formed. Approximately from the latter part of the twentieth century, modernism has been accused of disrespecting Otherness. We have often heard that modernism created its own narrative about artistic creation as a way to reach what is hidden behind languages, and to what is luring us towards a two-sided form of both Origin and Final Goal. In addition, we have been told that modernism evaluated all phenomena only in terms of their place in that narrative,

and therefore that it was not capable of encountering the Other in own individuality, its own world, its rhythms, and its goals. The proponents of postmodernism have been telling us that the search for the original source of languages, for the area where words are born, is nothing more than a manifestation of naivety—a naivety that may have grown out of good intentions, but that has been, just like any kind of longing for original or final Unity, dangerously close to totalitarian thought, and could therefore easily merge with it. Of course, some clear examples of this have been ready at hand. Moreover, we have been given a formula for how to avoid the lure of Unity: we have to recognize that there is nothing other than the plurality of mutually non-transferable languages; we should therefore necessarily accept this plurality and not try and overstep the boundaries of languages toward the dark place where words are born; and we could only distance ourselves from ready languages if we take them ironically.

I do not consider these objections against modernism raised by postmodern thinkers to be fair; they relate to various errors inherent in modernity rather than to the core of modernity itself or its best performances. Likewise, I have doubts about postmodern advice concerning the use of language plurality. Postmodernism rejects the false dialogue whose goal is to subordinate different languages and different worlds to one idea. However, in my opinion, the problem of postmodernism lies in the fact that its proponents often leave out *any* dialogue, or any attempt at breaking the boundaries between particular languages. Modernists, on the other hand, either tormented language to obtain its hidden sources, or listened patiently to the undercurrents of language, to the whispers and murmurs contained in words; through that means, they believed, language would surrender a novel message about reality. In contrast to this, the postmodern attitude to language is often too lenient and too indifferent: if there is nothing outside of ready language apart from other ready languages, then the search for the hidden origins of speech or to listen to quiet voices seems senseless. What remains, then, is a number of languages and their own worlds, languages that are mutually isolated, closed in upon themselves, and indifferent to each other. However, such indifference does not allow them to encounter the Other, in the same way false dialogue would not. The fact that we walk through a colorful mar-

ketplace of languages and cultures does not guarantee any true encounters or true dialogues, or any fruitful, profound experience of Otherness.

More than that, we are missing the essence of literature and art in general when we consider the relationship between different languages to be an indifferent plurality of worlds that are closed in upon themselves. Literary works—both in terms of their creation and perception—are based on Openness, on the perpetual amazement of the beings, things, and spaces that we encounter, and on how we listen to their unique voices—voices that then quietly ripen inside us. Such encounters have to change into our blood and find their way into the rhythms of our own gestures, as Rainer Maria Rilke wrote. In this respect, authentic modernism maintained and, in fact, radicalized the approach to literature in a sense that had not been seen before.

The adventure of encountering the Other and the Unknown is simultaneously a drama of forming the Self. For me, the Other is emerging as a challenge and awakens voices that have slept in the mazes that are within me, and that now can start to work. These initially indistinct voices are voices from the sources of my existence, which belong to the forces that have formed the patterns of my own language and my own life; they are present in these patterns, and yet they exceed them, and aim to build new languages and new worlds. The encounter with the Other that lies at the foundation of a literary work is always a surprising, unexpected encounter with myself as well as a discovery of the Otherness within myself—an Otherness whose presence is a source of the constant renewal of my existence, a possibility of continual rebirth. “My soul is hidden in outer things,” wrote Hofmannsthal; “I is someone else,” was Rimbaud’s reply. In other words, I cannot participate in a dialogue with the Other without such an encounter of Otherness within myself.

The birth of the globalized world, which we are currently witnessing, is certainly not something that we have simply learned from TV news programs, or read about in books written by political theorists. We can witness the manifestations of this global birth in our everyday life. One of the signs of that process is the fact that books by authors from five different continents can be seen side by side in our bookstore windows. We can adopt different attitudes to the birth of the globalized world. In my opinion, regarding this process as an opportunity for profound dia-

logues, and likewise for one's own perpetual rebirth, is certainly not the worst approach. The entire planet forms the stage for the Odyssey of our own lives now, and it seems that this new situation gives us the chance of gaining a new sensibility, wherein the Other can cease to be an enemy or an imperfect copy of ourselves, and Otherness can cease to be quaint exoticism or just a certain linguistic play that has nothing to do with our own linguistic plays. Moreover, it seems that literature is one of the major areas involved in this process.

Finally, I would like to add one note. In this essay, I discussed modernism and postmodernism, but it would be erroneous to pay much attention to such categorization. These are merely ambiguous definitions of places in the world—places where certain chances are offered and where certain traps lie waiting. In relation to a concrete work of art, such categories do not hold much sway. For great authors, regardless of whether they are counted among modernists, like Proust or Joyce, or among postmodernist, like Thomas Pynchon, these places are simply opportunities for expressing their unique messages.