

# Globalisation and Literature. What is Left of Literary History?

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**Résumé:** *L'article vise la relation entre la globalisation et la littérature, entre le fait qui exige une réflexion et la théorie de la nouveauté avec tout prix. L'histoire littéraire fait appel à la simultanéité et, en même temps, à la relativité des concepts.*

**Keywords:** *Gianni Vattimo, Sergio Benvenuto, globalisation, literary history*

Our world in continuous motion changes the way in which the individual relates to the facts of life. He becomes a nomadic creature caught in this unprecedented dynamic in which the borders are no longer stable; being constantly redefined, they become movable landmarks. The paradigm of time has also shifted to an eternal present based on the principles of simultaneity and relativity. In this context, the past, as Alexandru Mușina says, ceases to be a landmark in the individual's orientation towards the future, because it is lost in what the critic calls "a cultural obsession of living the new"<sup>1</sup>. This "cultural obsession" is explained as a perpetual reference to the present through which the past itself is discovered as new, inasmuch as its representations resonate with the contemporary anxieties of the individual<sup>2</sup>. For that matter, this obsolescence of the past, far from being new, is considered to be one of the obsessions of postmodernism, the critics rushing to proclaim "the end of history" through the futility of relating to another dimension than that of the present. In *The Transparent Society*, for instance, Gianni Vattimo associates the crisis of history with the explosion of mass communication, which generates an unprecedented multiplication of world visions<sup>3</sup>. In "The Third Time", Sergio Benvenuto, discussing the blurring of temporary perception, asserts that the past has been transformed into a kind of present through the hundreds of museums and amusement parks, through which history loses its depth, being transported via its images in immediate reality<sup>4</sup>. In another context (talking about the status of poetry in contemporaneity), but situating himself on the same position regarding the crisis of the temporal paradigm, Al. Mușina notices a paradoxical situation: despite this devaluation of the past, contemporary poetry is suffocated by the productions of the past: great names of the poetry of yore are transformed in celebrities of the present<sup>5</sup>. This holds true for literature in general, as in every bookshop one can find the great classics of Antiquity on the same shelf with the Nobel Prize winners of recent years, with complete disregard for chronology. Nevertheless, apart from the paradigm of postmodernity that justifies, on a cultural level, the need for the simultaneity of past and present, contemporaneity keeps this duplicitous reference to the past because of

globalization<sup>6</sup>, defined by Imre Szeman as a phenomenon placing emphasis on the “restructuring of relations of politics and power, on the rescaling of economic production from the national to the transnational, on the lightspeed operations of finance capital, and on the societal impacts of the explosive spread of information technologies”<sup>7</sup>. In this context, shift in reference regarding the past is justified by commercial purposes and the dissolution of national landmarks.

This does not involve the idea that the past is less important, because in this world of simultaneity and multiplicity, every turning towards the past is a form of exploring identity. To this extent and in the context of globalization, a history of literature returns to one of its main purposes, that is outlining certain landmarks in constructing identity, be it national, cultural, or even individual. Dealing with the issue of literary history from a diachronic point of view, Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer reinforce this idea by claiming that national identity is built through literature<sup>8</sup>. Moreover, a vernacular literature, the two say, even precede the formation of a state and contribute to the consolidation of an official language, a culture and even of an independent policy. This would be the reason for the “institutionalization of literature”, a phenomenon which occurred much later in the countries with a stable self-image than those in which identity issues destabilized the feeling of belonging<sup>9</sup>. This would be the explanation for some characteristics of literary histories identified by critics: most histories of literature center on national identity as an organizing principle<sup>10</sup>, even becoming, in some cases, depositories of national/cultural values<sup>11</sup>.

Contemporaneity, however, enforces a new direction in literature, through the incorporation of the unprecedented possibilities of motion and reference to multiple spaces, beyond physical restrictions. In fact, Imre Szeman asserts that global literature does not bring innovation at the level of style or form, as postmodern literature does, since the realities it refers to are meant to be “immediately legible”<sup>12</sup>. Instead, it seems to be concerned more with new social, political and economic relations generated by the phenomenon of globalization<sup>13</sup> and, taking the idea even further, with the anxieties these new realities generate. At the push of a button, a whole world opens and information from all the corners of the globe becomes available immediately, changing the dynamics between cultures, societies, and individuals. But this simultaneity becomes burdening, because the abundance of information ultimately displaces the individual and does not allow the construction of solid landmarks. In this context, identity issues become a constant of the individual in relation with the world he lives in. It is not about the consolidation of an identity on the level of a nation anymore, but about the salvation of an individual singularity. Invaded by cultural productions from different spaces, the individual is forced to leave his home on a journey between worlds. He becomes a citizen of the Global village, situating himself obliquely between cultures. Therefore, life becomes a nomadic existence in search of landmarks, a search that repeatedly fails, because time, in its continuous present, does not allow a clear sedimentation of values.

In this context, there is a need for a new lexicon that expresses the individual’s anxieties in relation with the relativization of his own world, because globalization, as a major social phenomenon of contemporaneity, generates a paradigm shift. Words

as exile, migration, deracination, displacement, all denoting the particular phenomenons of immigration or exile, gain, in the new world, positive connotations regarding the unprecedented mobility of the individual. Globalization thus pervades every domain, substantially altering the mode of perceiving the world. Global literature is then an expression of a new area of literary studies that focuses on the unprecedented mobility of both cultural productions and of the individual himself. New concepts appear, and old ones are reinterpreted so as to correspond to the new realities: transnational identity, diaspora, nomadism, multiculturalism, etc., all these pointing to the same reassessment of the position of the individual in relation to the fast changes of the world around him. Literature encompasses these contemporary turmoils and replies to these identity anxieties through a fictionalized embedding of both individual and collective experiences. Through this, and because of the contemporary socio-political tendencies in re-mapping the world, literature itself is subject to change: it is enriched with new themes, it involves a distinctive vocabulary and raises questions generated precisely by the awareness of the relativization of the landmarks. Thus, it does not only build itself on the experience of globalization, but it also creates, thematically and stylistically, a narrative discourse specific to the phenomenon.

In the center of this discourse is to be found the endless conflict between local and global, which, despite the multi-ethnic, multiracial and multicultural model proposed on a theoretical level, resides, in the end, in the affirmation of a national identity compared to the global paradigm, wider and not in the least specific. This obstinate emphasis of values specific to a particular space is generated, Shameem Black notices, by an economical interest. A lot of countries, the researcher observes, encouraging investments of funds from abroad, feel the need to affirm their national identity through cultural productions. Trying to win on the financial level through connections with the exterior world, these countries are unwilling to lose the coherence of their inner identity<sup>14</sup>. Thus, despite the dissolution, on the level of discourse, of the ideas of nations and borders, the preoccupation for delineating a national identity is as topical as it gets, and literature keeps its privileged place in doing that.

Generated in transcultural and multicultural contexts, literary works often raise questions pertaining to local values and become, in some cases, authentic depositories of cultural values. Hence the attempt of the postcolonial and postcommunist writers to pen, through a blurring of the differences between history and fiction, stories of the past undermined by the autarchic ideologies. The return towards the past is important, both on the national level, for asserting specific cultural values in relation to the global culture, and on the individual level, as an attempt to respond to anxieties generated by this conflict. For all that, literature does not limit itself to its ideological function. It implies both the idea of national identity, and the economic component, a literary product becoming, in its global itinerary, a commercial good, just like any other.

The explanation for this need of asserting the local within a global context is the attempt to legitimate the specificity of minor cultures, threatened by excessive imitation, in relation to the major ones. That is why Franco Moretti, considering contemporary literature a “planetary system”<sup>15</sup>, claims that, in touching the global dimensions, the literary work must accomplish two tasks: that of preserving native culture, but also that

of asserting itself on the international level, in the space of the fierce competitiveness of commercial principles<sup>16</sup>. David Damrosch too asserts this idea, claiming that, despite the importance of the literary work at a local level through the cultural load that it bears, it must enter a set of relations (rhizomatic, we would add) at a global scale, in order to survive outside its initial context<sup>17</sup>. The surviving strategies are, from this point of view, often incompatible, because the literary work must fold up to the individual's needs, both in relation to the local dimension of existence, and the global one. This explains the immediate success of novels written by lesser known authors, but who managed to answer through their works to the immediate anxieties of the contemporary world, without losing sight of the local context that generates the narrative. But the opposite is also valid: works of authors renowned at a global scale, but locally discredited, and, in the most common case, works important in a local context, but ignored outside.

Due to this literary abundance, irrespective of the socio-cultural context to which he relates, the individual is bombarded in the act of reading with literary works from all the corners of the world, each one being a bearer of the features of the culture in which it had been generated. Through this, the reader must resize his world, because reading itself becomes a nomad act through which a mediation space between cultures is created.

But the freedom of movement of the literary works is conditioned by the linguistic dimension. The language in which a book is written can open access routes, or, on the contrary, it can become a border. To this extent, translation is a means through which cultural values expressed in literary works travel one towards another, meeting in the act of reading. Thereby, literature itself becomes a field of competitiveness, not only between cultures, but also between languages of international circulation and those spoken in a specific area. Aware of the fact that a work written in a language spoken in more parts of the globe has more chances of popularity, some writers project their experiences directly in a more widespread idiom. This can be to the detriment of the cultural load that the work carries and which dilutes through the transfer in a language which is secondary to the author. Yet, as Shameem Black notices<sup>18</sup>, these works have a very important role in changing the idiom they are created in, enriching it with a unique specific note. It is a well known fact that the authors using in the creation of the literary work non-native linguistic codes have a different perspective upon language, discovering new nuances at the levels where native speakers see mistakes<sup>19</sup>.

But not all literary works are directly written in an international language. This raises the issue of translation which guarantees the attainability of the foreign cultures, sometimes at the expense of expressivity and implied significances by the native use of an idiom. Through translation, some of the local specific is lost, mostly at the level of connotations implied in the act of writing. Moreover, there are realities that prove to be untranslatable and which enrich the host idiom with foreign elements, forcing the reader to rethink his own linguistic dimension. This mutual contamination through literature does not limit itself to the language in which the work is written. Untranslatable realities that travel from one language to another are accompanied by specific thematic particularities. Situating the act of writing in a specific culture, according to Shameem

Black<sup>20</sup>, engages an entire arsenal of themes and motifs that in the end become characteristics of the entire contemporary literature, regardless of their place of origin.

Therefore, in the generous space of global literature, the works are mutually influencing each other, on both a linguistic and a thematic level, constructing a general cultural heritage of the individual transformed into a nomad. Moreover, a more pragmatic issue is raised: the access of these literary works to the space of the reader. In this context, globalization returns to its economic connotations, because, in order to reach global dimensions, a literary work must be, simply put, sold. Thus, the conflict between major cultures and minor ones are reflected in the institutions of translation and distribution. The whole discussion about cultural heritage, about mutual enrichment and the opening of new perspectives, comes down to the transformation of the literary work into a commercial good which, besides incorporating the anxieties of the individual in his journey through the world, must produce profit. Hence a generous debate about the economic agents engaged in this process and which, indirectly, contribute to the globalization of literature. In the transformation of the cultural product into a commercial product, criteria of value disappear, because cultural simultaneity prevents the settlement of a solid selection system. The consequences are that truly valuable works enter the same block, sometimes even identify with what is called “popular fiction”. Furthermore, in the institutions that study literature, there is a constant struggle to incorporate the very new alongside renowned classics, in a permanent attempt to encompass in the act of teaching both contemporary anxieties expressed by popular culture, and a solid system of values expressed by the works of the past.

In this context, literature too enters under the same umbrella of globalization understood as a corporatist mediation of the world. Reasons of financial order, but also the social and political conditions seem to be the criteria for choosing the literary works with a global potential. If the changes on the world's economical and political scene are the main factors responsible for the accessibility of a literary product, social events bring in the limelight particular literary works with which they resonate to a certain degree. In both cases, the temporal criterion is no longer valid. Both classical works and contemporary creations can become bestsellers (the ultimate criterion of success). The events from the immediate reality dictate a specific topic, a specific subject so that the literary work is useful inasmuch as it comes to meet the reader's anxieties (but the opposite is equally valid, although less common: literary works that are responsible for the onset of events on the social level).

The important thing is that literature can no longer be conceived as isolated from the world, and moreover, it does not suppose the individual's separation from reality. The writer is no longer isolated in an ivory tower, in a world of his own, inviting the reader to take refuge from reality in an alternative, Utopian world. He is part of the world as it is, and the act of writing becomes just a way in which reality changes into fiction. The literary work and the world in all its aspects are viewed as being closely related, strongly resonating, reflecting each other through a double-sided mirror, that is the reader. Once in the economical gear, that of the financial relations between the literary and marketing industries, literature is no longer subordinated to a single system of values. In fact, as David Damrosch asserts, literature is conceived as operating in

relation to four frames of reference: the global, the regional, the national and the individual. Moreover, says Damrosch, these frames of reference “continually shift over time, and so, the temporal dimension serves as a fifth frame within which world literature is continually formed and reformed”<sup>21</sup>. In this context, the perpetual present of our times explains the simultaneous existence of the great classics, commercialized according to the same criteria and with the same success as more recent literary productions. This is why the critic claims that we live in a post-canonical age<sup>22</sup>. The critic concludes that, eventually, the global dimension of literature comes down to the relations generated by the individual in the process of reading<sup>23</sup>. The explanation would be that the individual finds his identity shaken by the fast changes on a social, political and economic level and seeks landmarks in the attempt of recomposing a self-image. At the heart of this image is to be found the personal heritage that implies a return to his own past, and, implicitly, to the past of national values. The glance into the past is generated precisely by this identity interrogations triggered by the displacement brought about by the present. Still, revisiting the past does not involve an entire objective context, but it transforms the cultural heritage through personal life experiences. Therefore, despite the perpetual present, the preoccupation for the past, for a diachronic perspective on literature (and not only), is as present as it gets. It is visible, the critics notice<sup>24</sup>, especially in the spaces of minor cultures, in their attempt to legitimize their position in relation with the international context of multiculturalism.

Now, like always, literature is responsible for consolidating an identity, and also for affirming it around the globe. Still, what intervenes is the economical component, and literature must both incorporate the anxieties of the individuals and observe economic requirements. Because of that, Linda Hutcheon and Mario J. Valdés claim that a literary history must encompass in the present the whole institution of literature<sup>25</sup>. Economical, political perspectives, cultural issues of genre and races, all must contribute, the researchers say, to the construction of a history of literature. Besides, any literary history, regardless of the moment it was produced in, is circumscribed within a dominant discourse, emphasizing through the criterion of selectivity, the power relations existing in the moment of production. Thus, today, the idea of a history of literature must focus on the new positioning of literature itself with an eye to social and economic demands.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Alexandru Mușina, *Teoria și practica literaturii*, Muzeul literaturii române, Bucharest, 2012, p. 11

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Societatea transparentă*, Pontica, Constanța, 1995, p. 11

<sup>4</sup> Sergio Benvenuto, “Cel de-al treilea timp”, in *Lettre Internationale*, 1994

<sup>5</sup> Alexandru Mușina, *op. cit.* p. 17

<sup>6</sup> Imre Szeman, “Globalization, Postmodernism and (Autonomous) Criticism”, in Will Coleman, Petra Rethmann, Imre Szeman (ed.), *Cultural Autonomy: Frictions and Connections*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010. The researcher clearly differentiates between postmodernism and globalization, defining the first mainly in relation to aesthetics, and the latter in opposition to culture. p. 69

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 70

<sup>8</sup> Marcel Corniș-Pope, John Neubauer, “Towards a History of Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe: Theoretical Reflections”, *ACLS Occasional Paper*, No. 52, ISSN 1041-536X, 2002, p. 12

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*

<sup>10</sup> Imre Szeman, *op. cit.* p. 75

<sup>11</sup> Shameem Black, *Is there a global literature?*, Yale Insights, available at <http://qn.som.yale.edu/content/there-global-literature>, 01 July 2013, 11.08

<sup>12</sup> Imre Szeman, *op.cit.* p. 70

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>14</sup> Shameem Black, *op.cit.*

<sup>15</sup> Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature”, in *New Left Review*, 2000, p. 54, available at <http://newleftreview.org/II/1/franco-moretti-conjenctures-on-world-literature>, 01 iulie, 11.20

<sup>16</sup> Franco Moretti, *op.cit.*

<sup>17</sup> David Damrosch, “Framed for World Literature” în Simone Winko, Fotis, Jannidis, Gerhard Lauder (ed), *Grenzen der Literatur*, Walter deGruyter Press, Berlin, 2009, p. 497.

<sup>18</sup> Shameem Black, *op.cit.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>21</sup> David Damrosch, *op.cit.*, p. 496

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 511

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 513

<sup>24</sup> Shameem Black, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Linda Hutcheon, Mario J. Valdes, *Rethinking Literary History – Comparatively*, ACLS Occasional Papers, available at [http://archives.acls.org/op/27\\_rethinking\\_literary\\_history.htm](http://archives.acls.org/op/27_rethinking_literary_history.htm), 01 July 2013, 11.30

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