Status of Literature in the Age of Global Risks

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This paper scrutinises the possible connections of the diminished prestige of literature with globalisation, especially with the breakdown of nation building projects supported by elites, and with the demand of a spiritual-discursive self-understanding instead of a narrative one which characterises the reading strategies that made fiction popular.

Keywords: literature / national culture / nation states / cosmopolitanism / globalization

Literature does not seem to have the prestige it used to have. This change, of course, must have various causes, but one may try to interpret it in connection with the general transformation of our world, namely the transition from the system of nation states to globalisation, or from the cultural system of nation states to cosmopolitanism. A strong argument for such an approach may be that the status of literature has not been constant in history; just like the nation state has not been a universal or natural rule but a historical development, which started in the seventeenth century (MacNeill; Beck, *Sociology* 64). Literature achieved a special prestige in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the loss of this prestige may be connected with some features of the decline of the nation state or some general trends of the global transformation.

Nationalism attached (and attaches) strongly positive values to national culture. A nationalist wants to be proud of his nation's cultural achievements, and since the concept of the nation is at least partly based on the concept of a shared culture, the importance of cultural heritage, and especially the written part of it, is highly emphasised in a national context. The shared culture is, of course, a wider notion than that of elite cultural phenomena; among others it includes language, religion, customs, costumes, cuisine, historical memory, ceremonies, and codes of behaviour. Every such feature can be important in the discourse of nationalism, but the emphasis laid on national elite culture is obvious. Folklore achievements, for example, may even be subsumed into the heritage of an elite culture. In the age of Romanticism, for instance, folk songs were regarded as poetry

(cf. Porter & Teich). Until that time, literature was a rather closed system of communication, which took its impetus mostly from the inside. With the coming of the new concept of nation, however, the notion of literature was extended to include products of strata that were to be solicited to have a commitment to the new community.

The nationalist approach to literature has various consequences, and I will mention only some of them. Nineteenth-century nation states tended to finance a literary scholarship that discovered, preserved, or even worshipped national literature (Cornis-Pope & Neubauer 12)[1]. The establishment of the majority of departments for literary history at European universities might have been connected with that purpose. Many countries promote and, to various degrees, finance literary production because they regard the continuous existence of national culture as crucially important. Nationalism or the episteme of a nation state does not influence only professionals (i.e., authors and scholars); it may develop a way of reading too. Moreover, it can make reading a patriotic duty. The cult of literature or literary authors in the nineteenth century is well-documented, but I can see comparable phenomena in my own country even today. During the last few years Albert Wass, an author who died in American emigration in 1998 and was scarcely known in Hungary during his lifetime, has achieved immense popularity among the right wing. The spread of his cult can be measured by the number of statues erected to him recently, partly on private property and mainly in churchyards. Some local authorities also favoured the popular demand for such statues, but civil initiatives for erecting statues of Wass were turned down in many places, since he was sentenced to death *in contumaciam* for war crimes by a Romanian court in 1946. What is more surprising, many people buy and read his books. It is surprising because Wass is an extremely awkward prose writer and a miserable poet. Reading his prose I regard as a kind of torture; but I have to admit that some of his apparently serious patriotic poems provide me with inexhaustible sources of fun and laughter. Nevertheless, many people usually and proudly read his texts because of the obvious and easily assimilable nationalist content. His status as a cultural icon is not merely a matter of personality cult; what is at issue here is also a cult of reading as a national duty. One may question whether a cosmopolitan perspective can provide a scholarly interpretative practice, which would be attractive or useful for nation states. It obviously cannot solicit deep emotional commitment on behalf of readers.

The sponsoring activity of nation states—sometimes even the formation of nation states—is part of the project of nation building, which is strongly connected with the economic elite's demands to enforce their interests. The second modernity evinced basic changes in the attitudes of

the elites, and I would like to emphasise two features, which I think influence the status of literature. The new global or cosmopolitan elite is not interested in nation building projects any longer, since even the residues of defensive national markets seem rather to restrict than to promote their economic activity. They need political fragmentation, weak quasi-states, and a "flexible" labour market, i.e., a defenseless one, which is completely deprived of any means of resistance (Bauman, *Globalization* 67–69 and 103–105). The new centres of power are much less interested in promoting culture, or at least national cultures, than nation states used to be. But can they be interested in promoting a cosmopolitan elite culture?

Prior to modernity different classes of closed societies had their respective characteristic cultures and codes of behaviour. The restricted possibilities of social mobility presupposed or went parallel with the appropriation of a new culture. In the earlier periods of the modern age, when societies became more open and people more mobile between the social strata, elite culture remained something that social climbers had to learn. The relationship of the elite culture and an ethical code was an important topic in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature in the form of literary types such as the hypocrite and the nouveau rich (cf. Trilling 14–18). Since the set of possible examples seems inexhaustible, one short reference may do. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* can be interpreted as a parade of characters problematic from the viewpoint of the relationship between behaviour and social position. George Wickham plays the role of a gentleman with such perfection that his performance is rather eye-catching. No one else in the novel is able to attract attention merely by walking like a gentleman, as he does when he first appears in Meryton.[2] The superficial acculturation of the social climber, however, has only a short term effect.[3] The first of the possible objections that he is no gentleman by birth, asserted by Miss Bingley (ch. 18), does not seem to be accepted by the protagonist Elizabeth Bennett or the implied author; but the second one that he appropriated only the behavioural and not the moral code proves to be devastating. Does reading play a role in the elite acculturation into the society represented by the novel? In Wickham's case there is no mention of such an aspect but there are some hints suggesting that the lack of reading is at least partly responsible for Mr. Collins's poor social performance. The deficiencies of his nature had not been corrected by education, since he spent his youth "under the guidance of an illiterate and miserly father," (ch. 15) and it is hardly a coincidence that he never reads novels (ch. 14). Some characters discuss the importance of reading and the aspects of a woman's accomplishment in Chapter 8. The discussion is finished by Darcy's statement that for a truly accomplished woman "the improvement of her

mind by extensive reading" is something substantial. An opposite evaluation comes from Mr. Hurst, who finds it "rather singular" that Elizabeth prefers reading to cards. However, he "merely looked the gentleman" and "he was an indolent man, who lived only to eat, drink, and play at cards" (chs. 3 and 8, respectively). Therefore, he is rather a counterexample of the elite behavioural code. How then could Jane and Elizabeth Bennett learn their perfect behaviour, style and taste? In Chapter 29 Elizabeth admits that their education was neglected in the family. Their brilliant performance in social life is the result of autodidactic activity, while the younger sisters were simply too idle for self-perfection. Furthermore, the means of this self-education was reading: "We were always encouraged to read, and had all the masters that were necessary."[4]

Before the middle of the twentieth century, however, high culture was not regarded as a mere shibboleth of the elite but as their privilege. Revolutionary thinkers thought that illiterate and uneducated classes were deprived of something good when they had no access to the sublime products of literature and art. Beginning with the second half of the nineteenth century, book clubs and libraries were organised for workers. As a short excursion, I would like to mention that communist regimes more or less accepted this heritage and tried to cultivate the widest masses of their societies. The Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, which was founded in 1906, originally had no lighting. It was only open during the hours of daylight. The communist leaders, however, realised that this situation prevented labourers from visiting the museum and seeing fine paintings, for the museum was already closed at the time when labourers knocked off work at the end of a working day. This had not previously been a problem, since those people for whom the museum was originally designed had plenty of free time to go there in the middle of the day. The illumination was installed, and workers got the opportunity to visit the museum after work. Nevertheless, they tended to pass up this opportunity. And this is my point: elite culture ceased to be attractive not only for working masses but also for the elites. Joining the elite does not presuppose acculturation any longer, at least not one which contains a dose of traditional erudition. In the 1963 movie *From Russia with Love*, James Bond says he should have known that the British operative he met on the Orient Express was an imposter because he had ordered fish and *red* wine. Agent 007, apart from being an action hero, easily finds his way in the world of the rich. I would like to regard him as a proto-icon of a cosmopolitan elite: jetting around the world, visiting luxury hotels and casinos, being an expert on wine, cognac, and sake as well. The breaking of a gastronomic rule indicates that a person does not belong to that cosmopolitan elite (or to those who

can professionally imitate them). On the other hand, it is telling that what reveals a phoney agent is such an issue of "banal cosmopolitanism" (Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision* 10 and 40–44), and not anything that had previously made members of elites identifiable, such as language (pronunciation or vocabulary), movement, taste in dressing, or erudition. In the movie it should be interpreted as a joke about the new trends, because the old linguistic identification skills are still valid to a significant degree. Since the traditional erudition (including literature) has lost its importance for the new cosmopolitan elite in the creation of group identity, I cannot see why they would promote a cosmopolitan elite culture. The Enlightenment project of culture, i.e. cultivating the masses (Bauman, *Liquid Life* 52–67; cf. Adorno 107−115), seems to have come to an end.

The immense popularity of fiction during the nineteenth century is partly attributed to the fact that after the breakdown of a single and generally accepted worldview and value system, people turned toward literature to find some interpretations of the world and their lives (Houghton 101; Iser 17–18). In retrospect, however, it seems that the understanding of the self in the world that once was, required a narrative character. It may be true that readers were above all looking for points of orientation to stabilise their value systems, but they wanted to see these embedded in a plot. They wanted to project themselves into a story and see how one should react to the different and incalculable challenges of life. Various basic forms of the nineteenth-century novel—such as the *Erziehungsroman,* career story, or the historical novel—may be regarded as centred around this narrative view of self-adaptation. It was, however, still the age of reason, and the understanding of the world that literature provided was essentially rational. A declaration stating that the situation has changed in the modern and post-modern age does not necessarily mean that there is no need for a unified worldview or value system any longer. On the one hand, I think, there is a massive demand for unified worldviews, but good literature refuses to supply any. On the other hand, the post-modern understanding can happily accept the impossibility of unified interpretations as a guarantee of freedom. Nevertheless, this pertains only to a unified interpretation of the world, which does not exclude the possibility that literature could play a role in people's self-understanding. Another aspect of the change in the need for self-understanding in our times is the fact that it ceased to be of narrative character; it is instead spiritual or discursive and tends to accept even the dominance of irrational elements. The devaluation of narrative understanding of one's personal life may be the consequence of the experience that circumstances change in a rapid and unpredictable way, and there is no guarantee that strategies or methods

of adaptation successfully used in the past will continue to be successful in future. The narrative self-understanding is useless for what Zygmunt Bauman describes as "liquid life" (Bauman, *Liquid Life* 1).

This recent spiritual-discursive self-understanding is widely cosmopolitan. People do not raise any objection to mixing together Chinese and Western astrology, the spiritual traditions of India or the Far East with Christianity, or to combining old European alternative healing practices, such as homeopathy, with acupuncture, which are both holistic and partly spiritual. If a single unified, universal, and exclusive system cannot be found, various systems can be combined to contribute to a fragmentary understanding of a world and a self. Moreover, the personal conglomerate versions of spiritual teachings selected from around the world tend to be of a non-narrative character, and therefore have little use for fiction. Nowadays even a bestseller must contain long discursive passages to satisfy readers. In Paulo Coelho's *Alchemist*, every truism the hero learns about the world and his individuality during his quest is formulated in a rather didactic way. Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* entices readers through long discussions on proportions in nature and art, on interpretations of Leonardo da Vinci's paintings, on medieval history and buildings, and above all on the sacred feminine. Furthermore, this spiritual-discursive aspect might have contributed more massively to the book's success than the thriller plot. The hero is rather similar to that type, which probably goes back to Steven Spielberg's 1971 television movie *Duel,* and has had a great career in Hollywood ever since. An everyday man becomes a hero under the pressure of an inexplicable but obviously mortal threat. He seems to be a natural born loser with absolutely no preparation, training or any sign of skills that would equip him to meet the challenge. Nevertheless, he becomes a real hero at the end: he slowly realises that the threat is real and the normal codes of behaviour do not work in the new situation, when evil appears in a life that until that time seemed completely safe. It is a comforting idea that anybody, even if obviously lacking any apparent prerequisite of heroism, is a potential hero. A quiet middle class life does not appear as the opposite of adventurous heroism but its disguise. Do not worry, when the time comes or when it becomes necessary, you can be a hero. Dan Brown modified that scheme to a not insignificant degree, but basic features remained the same. The main characters (an art historian and a cryptologist) do not seem to be qualified to cope with the task of completing an investigation of a brutal murder and eluding both the French police and Interpol. Yet they manage to do it. Robert Langdon, however, is not just an everyday person; he is a celebrity. If it is true that celebrities have taken over the place of heroes in our age

(Bauman 2005, 39–52), Dan Brown narrates a comforting inverse story, in which the celebrity is not only famous for being known by many people with no recognisable merit but a potential hero, who develops into a real hero when something goes wrong in the world. This version of a thriller may solicit many readers; but, more importantly, the long discursive passages of the novel offer an alternative interpretation of various moments in Western cultural and art history insofar as they are rendered as resulting from the machinations of a secret society. This is the doubt shed on everyday knowledge that Zygmunt Bauman calls post-modern: "the narrative that knowledge does offer is not the only story that may be told; not even the best story." He opposes this kind of doubt to the modern kind, which concerns events that cannot be fitted into the narratives of knowledge. (Bauman, *Modernity* 238–245.)

The global risks of the present era have developed a cosmopolitan and worldwide community of awareness (Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vison* 7 and passim). The question arises whether this global awareness of being threatened situates literature or high culture in general as a peripheral and childish game of irresponsible past generations, or whether it can generate some kind of literature. I am not thinking of literary works written *on* the global risks specifically. Since the realization of environmental threats is necessarily discursive and because people need to rationally understand logical connections between seemingly disparate phenomena, such works would probably result in primitive propaganda, or in something closer to journalism than to literature. The threat of terrorism may be a different topic. On the other hand, there are similarities. The easy, fast, and obviously false interpretations, such as a 'war of cultures' or the Bush government's wars, are so simple that they probably cannot inspire literature, while a more detailed, global social analysis presupposes a complicated discursive representation calling for a discursive understanding. My own statements have been formulated on the basis of current aesthetic ideologies founded on the modern and post-modern experience of literature as an autonomous and mostly self-referential system. We may, however, see a return of the literature of commitment even in the near future. Cultural analysis has already relegated literature to a site of ideological production and sedimentation. At the moment, however, I am rather thinking of the possibility of a kind of literary communication, which counts on the awareness of global threats. This awareness should be present in every kind and at every site of communication, i.e., texts, readers, critics.

Should it? Actually, I can imagine a re-reading of the entire body of world literature on the basis of the present awareness of being threatened. In this case, the awareness is present only to the readers or critics, and

the texts are in a state of innocent ignorance. I do not think such interpretations would be inadequate, since readers cannot and should not try to disregard vital elements of their attitudes or horizons. A literary text is necessarily affected by the historical changes even after its publication, and its meaning is evidently modified in a new cultural environment. This general notion also pertains to the development of a global awareness of, for example, environmental threats.

Let me refer to a non-literary example. I feel very uncomfortable watching George Lucas's movie *American Graffiti* (1973), which presents the lifestyle of the early sixties with obvious nostalgia. Young people are driving their cars around a California suburb all night, just for the sake of fun and sociability. Those irresponsible people, polluting the air, destroying the environment, without even giving a thought to what they are doing! But could they know? Probably they could not; but George Lucas in 1973 could, so the unproblematic nostalgia for a youth before the Vietnam War can be challenged from an environmentalist viewpoint. 1973 was closer to the year of the smog episode in West Germany (1985) than to that of the Great London Smog (1952), and it was the year when Wolfgang Petersen shot his movie *Smog,* which seemed a sci-fi at the time but turned into a documentary film in my eyes when I was a teenager in the 1980s. Is the European perspective so much different? There is a danger that the awareness of environmental risks makes the interpretation too ideological; I have to admit that Lucas made a much better film than Petersen. Even in the 1980s, Europeans regarded smog a local threat, proposing to solve the problem by exporting the most dangerously polluting industry to the Third World in order to externalise the environmental and health price. It took some time to realise that this manoeuvre, apart from being obviously immoral, did not diminish the global risk. Nevertheless, the awareness of global threats is contributing to a re-reading of the canon—such re-reading is one of the trends of eco-criticism—through supplying new viewpoints in conformity with a new ethics.

The awareness on behalf of worldwide communities may influence literary production sooner or later, even if it results in a demand of discursive-journalistic treatments at the moment. The borderline between them is also fading since post-modern poetics mingled popular and elite cultural ways, and since cultural studies regarded literature as one of the various cultural phenomena yielding insights into ideology or ethics. The play *Holland Tsunami* presented by the Space Theatre in Amsterdam tried to discuss such topics as migration and xenophobia through the genre of a fictional documentary play. The obliteration of borders between document and fiction, theatrical illusion and reality, had a comic effect, which

highlighted the absurd and inconsequential nature of everyday attitudes. Comic and satirical genres may be evocative, without becoming primitively didactic, through creatively mixing various discourses. A street (or guerrilla) art group in Szeged created a movement called "Against People with Cars," among many other sections of the *Reality Creating Centre of the Two-Tailed Dog*. Leaflets were put under windscreen wipers with the text "Thank you for your active involvement in destroying the planet's biosphere." Their modification of a giant poster car ad is also memorable. The modified text reads: "Auto. Guaranteed developments: More species wiped out, bigger hole in the ozone layer, more Arabic countries occupied. With us you can defeat your planet." (http://www.mkkp.hu/)

The rise of a cosmopolitan literature, however, has one more potential. Representations of local realities may be created with an awareness of global consequences, and even if they are not, they will necessarily be read and interpreted with respect to a global context. An African literary effort, which describes the "privatisation of violence" and one of the "New Wars" (Kaldor, *New and Old*[5]) in a country, cannot be an exotic report of a faraway reality any longer, since many readers know that it is a continent-wide issue, and beyond that, that it is not Africans' own business. There is a global responsibility for what is happening in any area of the planet, and there are global consequences as well.

My cosmopolitan vision therefore involves a practice of interpretation that takes global risks into consideration, even if the text to be interpreted does not focus on them on the thematic level; and this awareness may influence literary production.

NOTES

[1] For some important caveats see Tihanov 66.

[2] "But the attention of every lady was soon caught by a young man, whom they had never seen before, of most gentlemanlike appearance, walking with another officer on the other side of the way. […] All were struck with the stranger's air, all wondered who he could be." Chapter 15.

[3] As Darcy formulates the idea in Chapter 18, "Mr. Wickham is blessed with such happy manners as may ensure his making friends—whether he may be equally capable of retaining them, is less certain."

[4] Such thoughts on the representation of social roles and strategies in Jane Austen's novels are compatible with the recent feminist approach to the oeuvre that tends to focus on the relation of women's possible social roles to the construction of female identity. (Cf. Looser)

[5] For a concise summary see Kaldor, *Cosmopolitanism* 271–274.

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Položaj literature v času globalnih tveganj

Ključne besede: literatura / nacionalna kultura / državotvornost / kozmopolitizem / globalizacija

Zmanjšano veljavo literature je mogoče pojasniti v povezavi s splošnim prehodom od kulturnega sistema nacionalnih držav v svetovljanstvo. Nacionalizem pripisuje nacionalni kulturi zelo pozitivne vrednote, saj je koncept naroda osnovan na konceptu skupne kulture. Številne države podpirajo in financirajo literarno produkcijo, ker se jim zdi trajni obstoj nacionalne kulture ključnega pomena. Svetovljanska perspektiva očitno ne more ponuditi niti znanstvene interpretativne prakse, ki bi bila koristna za nacionalne države, niti globoke čustvene predanosti, ki bi bila po volji bralcev.

Pokroviteljska dejavnost nacionalnih držav je del projekta izgradnje naroda, ki je tesno povezan z zahtevami ekonomske elite po uveljavljanju njenih interesov. V drugem obdobju modernosti se je vedenje elit bistveno spremenilo. Nove globalne elite nič več ne zanima izgradnja nacije, saj se zdi, da celo ostanki defenzivnih nacionalnih trgov omejujejo njeno ekonomsko dejavnost. Novih centrov moči ne zanima podpiranje kulture, saj je zanje tradicionalna erudicija izgubila pomen celo pri oblikovanju skupinske identitete.

Veliko priljubljenost fikcije v 19. stoletju deloma pripisujejo dejstvu, da so se ljudje po propadu enotnega in splošno sprejetega svetovnega nazora in vrednostnega sistema obrnili k literaturi, da bi v njej našli razlago sveta in svojega življenja. Sprememba se kaže v tem, da so zdaj potrebne spiritualne ali diskurzivne interpretacije in ne več narativne.

Zaradi globalnih tveganj sedanjega časa so se razvile svetovljanske in po vsem svetu razširjene osveščene skupnosti. Vprašanje je, ali to pomeni, da je literatura oz. visoka kultura na splošno nepomembna in otročja igra neodgovornih preteklih rodov, ali pa lahko nastane nekakšna literatura, ki računa na ozaveščenost glede globalne grožnje. Kljub dvomu v obstoj take literature se zdi, da sta satirična in komična zvrst primerni za izražanje takih vsebin.

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