

Teaching European Literature(s)

Sonja Stojmenska-Elzeser

Abstract

This paper questions the possibility of teaching European Literature in the academy. Can we speak about European Literature as one coherent and cumulative teaching field? Evidently, there are problems with defining European identity itself, so the question of European literature is even more complicated and uncertain. Which and whose literary works could be incorporated in the common European literary canon, if such a canon exists at all? The building of such a canon must take into consideration many different, mainly unliterary aspects: the pragmatic aspects of literary phenomena, the literary field, market, economy, literary awards, etc. Also, postcolonial aspects are very influential, especially regarding the minor cultures and the hybrid cultures born as a result of migrations. From the other side, there are some moments in literary history that are very appropriate for European contextualization, and others which are not. For example, the period of Renaissance, or medieval culture, or the culture of 20th century, can be easily researched on a transnational level. But, there are also movements that are local and it is difficult to observe in what respect these fit into the wider European context. Theoretical and practical problems of observing European literature as a whole, based on the principles of inclusion, transculturality and overcoming eurocentricity are main points in this discussion.

Keywords: European literary canon, European identity, European cultural context, eurocentricity, transculturality

Teaching European Literature(s)

The present-day academy faces many challenges on theoretical and practical levels. To teach literature nowadays is a very uncertain and provocative task because of the questionable position of literature in the contemporary world. The problematic approach to the classical concept of literary history makes all the efforts for encyclopedic knowledge meaningless. Also, the new media and growing dominance of information technologies have a serious impact on literature's existence. Political, economical and other unliterary movements are responsible for the axiological gap between art and literature, and for their enormous production, re-production and commercialization. What can be the main goal in teaching literature in academies today, except to make the students capable of keeping a relationship with literature, to enjoy literature and to think about it and comment on its values in a wider cultural contexts?

Starting from that point I would like to examine the possibilities of teaching literature in a European context instead of teaching one monolithic compendium of European literature(s). In fact, the speculations on this issue are a kind of proposal for a postgraduate course in cultural studies which uses an interdisciplinary approach to literature and arts from the point of view of European identity. Evidently, there are problems with defining European identity itself, so the question of European literature is even more complicated. Which and whose literary works could be incorporated into the common European literary canon, if such a canon exists at all? The building of such a canon can no longer be based on principles of classical literary history, but it must take into consideration many different, mainly unliterary aspects: the pragmatic aspects of literary phenomena, the literary field, market, economy, literary awards, etc. Also, postcolonial aspects are very influential, especially regarding the minor cultures and the hybrid cultures born as a result of migrations. Transculturality as a dominant form of reality in the world has serious consequences on the humanities. For all these reasons I dare to ask: Does the academy need a canonical approach at all? Does the student need to have encyclopedic knowledge about the sum of the national literary canons that are included in the European integration process? I prefer to answer this question negatively and I would rather mention that students need to have a proper orientation and basic skills in navigating the map of Europe's "republic of letters" (let me use the term from the title of the

influential book by Pascale Casanova), but, on the other hand, to have developed a strong sense of the specificities of the European cultural context.

What do I mean when I say specificities of a European cultural context? First of all, I think of the constant redefinition of the European identity as one unstable and ever changing concept. Europe as “Fenix”, as “unfinished adventure” (according to Zygmund Bauman, 2004), as something that is still in expectation, as identity that is in process of being built, or “under reconstruction”... Europe is an enigma: geographically it is “a little promontory on the continent of Asia” (Paul Valery), in mythology it is a raped princess who is happy to be kidnapped, for politicians it is an “unidentified political object” (Jacques Delors), for economists – one common market “without soul”, for philosophers very different things, for example for Immanuel Kant it is the “perpetual peace” project, for George Steiner (2004) “a map of cafés”, for H.G. Gadamer it is “fusion of horizons”.

The question of European identity is very often treated in literary works, so it helps to include the voices of poets and writers in this endless discussion. The orientation of a student in this “intellectual cartography” of the idea of, about and for European culture is most important for further understanding of its phenomena as inclusive, transcultural, post-national and post-Eurocentric. Intercultural communication, multiple identities, pluralism and diversity should be widely accepted as principles of the rethinking of a European context. Europe should be always accepted as a mission, as a task, according to the Italian philosopher Massimo Cacciari, who says: “We must always be building Europe. And it can’t be built with hegemonic intentions, as we have seen throughout European history: Charlemagne, Charles V, Napoleon, Hitler – they all attempted to exercise hegemonic power over Europe. But every time someone has tried it, Europe has got rid of them, she has not wanted anyone who wanted *one* Europe. Europe is not one, they are many” (Interview with Massimo Cacciari) “I am many”, says Europe. We have to be capable of being many.. In this multiple and polycentric vision of European culture the literature can’t be observed as *grand narrative* - it can exist just in partial networks, localized narratives, nexuses of researchers made from a European, but not Eurocentric perspective.

Such researchers can have a vertical or horizontal direction, or with other words, they can cross time or space, to be historic or geographic in a postmodern sense. The first ones refer to the different stylistic formations in the classic literary history that can be commented on from the European

perspective. Some of the best books of ComLit de facto are such types of research. The problem is that there are some moments in literary history that are very appropriate for European contextualization, and others which are not. For example, the period of the Renaissance, or medieval culture, romanticism, modernism or the culture of the 20th century, can be very easily put in frames and can be researched on a transnational European level. But, also there are movements that are local and it is difficult to observe to what extent these movements fit into the wider European context. Depending on the affiliations of the students and on the teacher's main fields of interest, one can choose various aspects to be researched in a European context. In such an approach of great help are new electronic archives that provide access to materials from visual arts and literature in enormous quantity, so that they become an important and necessary educational tool.

From a horizontal perspective the multiple European identity can be researched from the starting point of cultural geography mainly oriented to the uniqueness of the European regions, and the dominant characteristic of the literature written within them. For example, I would mention the research of the Mediterranean cultural sphere (as it is done in Fernan Braudel's work for example) or of the phenomena of Mitteleurop or/and Central Europe (although literally these concepts seem to be synonyms, they are not, as seen through the lens of Milan Kundera, Vaclav Havel, Danilo Kish etc.), the West and East, or Occident-Orient implications in culture and literature, the specificity of the Balkan region (Maria Todorova), of the Black Sea (Neil Asherson), of the Danube river (Claudio Magris), reflections on Nordic, Alps-Adriatic, Iberian and others cultural regions and other similar research.

Especially provocative and still enigmatic and strongly politically colored is the problem of the East European and South-East European cultural region (as an example in these frames I will mention the project *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, 2004). This approach in classic ComLit was strongly expressed in the theory of interliterary communities advocated by Dionis Djuřin and afterwards they came into the focus of studies worldwide, introducing the consciousness of common characteristics of wider, mainly geographical or geopolitical regions. One of the highlights of such a type of ComLit research which is now combining literary histories and Zeitgeist-history with geopolitical implications is the project *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* coordinated by Margaret R. Higonnet in

volumes that are devoted to avant-garde, renaissance, romanticism (as stylistic formations in European context) and Caribbean, East-Central European and Iberian regions (as geo-cultural regions of Europe). It is a pity that this kind of research hasn't yet been sufficiently introduced into the educational process.

On this level Europe is observed as "Europe of regions", of nexuses, of intercultural connections. Another level of observation could be "Europe of urban settlements, of cities". European cities as a backstage for many narratives, give an opportunity to comment on the characteristics of plurivocal and intercultural European realities. There are so many literary works connected or devoted to particular cities, and through that there is so much material for discussions, which can combine the literary facts with architecture, film, tourism, urban sociology and other aspects of cultural studies. For example, cities like Dublin, Sankt Petersburg, Paris, Prague, Barcelona can be seen through the eyes/discourses of their writers James Joyce, Alexander Pushkin, Charles Baudelaire, Franz Kafka and many architects, filmmakers, painters... Most provocative on this level are border cities and cities with strong multi- and intercultural background, so called "liminal cities" or "marginocentric cities", such as the cities of Odessa, Vilnius, Trieste, Sarajevo, Skopje... The modern concept of *flâneury* and the postmodern concept of "imagined cities", as well as the influence of art and literature on a city's formation of its own identity are some of the questions to be discussed in these frames.

Cities are the surroundings for transcultural transformations provoked by the migrations, exiles, travelling, etc., and any new elaboration of European culture has to count on that. "Transnational and transcultural streams are not exceptions anymore, we can say that they became norm or very soon will be norm. They are the material from which the European culture and identity should be carefully built" (Meinhof & Triandafyllidou, 2008). The literary studies have to take care of writers whose profiles and literary works are "on the borders" and who express the cultural dialog in their works. Exiled and diasporic authors make the special issue of teaching literature in a European context.

The matter of cultural mediation focuses our attention on the most important aspect of supranational cultural and literary research. That is the translation issue. Students must be aware of the importance of the literary translation as a highly creative work, but also of the non-literary impacts on its

development. It is always a result of many cultural streams, connected with ideology, politics, fashion, marketing, literary awards and other segments of cultural industry. For literary works coming from so called "minor cultures", to be recognized and accepted by the readers of other European environments, is one of the main goals. Successful translation in several languages is the first step to it. Also the system of translating literature in minor cultures has a much more complex role in the literary polysystem (to use the terminology of Itamar Even Zohar, 1979) than in the cultures with great influence. That's why the theory and practice of literary translation is a very important part of education and of cultural policy in general today. Here comes the rhetorical question posed by Zygmunt Bauman on this matter : " ...how much wisdom we would have all gained, how would our co-existence have benefited, had part of the Union's funds been devoted to the translation of members' writings... Personally I am convinced that it would have been perhaps the best investment into the future of Europe and the success of its mission" (Bauman, Z.). With the new technologies the policies of "better knowing each other" (or the vision of a possibility for "everyone to know everyone") become more and more optimistic, so the numerous projects of electronic sources or libraries, archives and digitalized museums provide us with access to a really wide quantum of information.

It is obvious that the proposed educational practice is rather eclectic from the point of view of the methodology. In fact, it is the teaching program on the crossroad of ComLit and cultural studies, which combines various disciplines (philosophy, history, sociology) and different approaches (area studies, postcolonial critics, translation studies etc.). Somebody could ask: Where is the literature here? This program addresses postgraduate students who have surpassed the phase of "literarische Bildung" and who read literature not just in their mother language, but also in at least one foreign language. They are supposed to be acquainted with the most important readings from world literature before taking an adventure of European contextualization of literature. With this proposed type of literary education we could contribute to the building of "European citizenship" and to the forming of a European public sphere, which is one of the main necessities of present European integration processes.

Literature is a phenomenon of cultural dialogue and a specific mode of communication. If we agree that "Europe exists only in the modes of communication about it" and that the "EU has become more like a network

than a traditional state" (Delanty, 2006) than researching literature in a European context is one of the most interesting fields to examine the basic ideas of EU, the dominant European discourses and concepts and the European autopoietic self-definition. Such an approach to literature studies is appropriate to the human situation in "liquid modernity" (Bauman) and is strongly future-oriented.

Conclusion

Modern knowledge does not consist just of information. It is much more about moving through information, systematizing and applying facts according to some premises. That's why my advocating for teaching literature in a European context rather than teaching the history of literatures written in Europe in a classic sense is a kind of orientation, preparation and general framework for various research projects chosen by the students themselves. In contact with literature written in the countries located on the European continent they learn how to recognize and to overcome the Eurocentric position, not just in the imperial history but also today, in the policies, discourses and movements of our time. They learn to appreciate the main value of the EU concept of *unity in diversity* and to respect the plurality. They get acquainted with many different understandings of the concept of Europeaness through history, in politics, philosophy, literature and in common life, and receive some basic directions for perception of the cultural heritage of Europe, participate in the redefinition of European imagination and enrich the polyglossia of discourses on Europe.

References

- Ашерсон, Н. (2003). *Црно море*. Скопје: Магор.
- Bauman, Z. (2004). *Europe: An Unfinished Adventure*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Brodel, F. (2001). *Mediteran 1, 2, Mediteran i mediteranski svet u doba Filipa II*. Beograd: Geopoetika.
- Cacciari, M. (1996). *Geo-filozofija Europe*. Zagreb: Ceres.
- Casanova, P. (2004) *The World Republic of Letters*. Harvard University Press.
- Delanty, G. (2006). *The Shape of the New Europe*. Rogowski, R. & Turner, C. (Eds)
- Even Zohar, I. (1979). Polysystem Theory. *Poetics Today* 1(1-2, Autumn) pp. 287–310.
- Comis-Pope, M. & Neubauer, J. (Eds.). (2004). *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th centuries*. Virginia Commonwealth University / University of Amsterdam.
- Kant, I. (1795). *Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch*.
- Le Goff, J. (2005). *The Birth of Europe*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- D'haen, T. & Goerlandt, J. (Eds.). (2009). *Litterature for Europe?* Amsterdam-New York: Rodopi.
- Magris, C. (2008). *Danube*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Steiner, G. (2004). *The Idea of Europe*, Nexus Institute.
- Steiner, G. (2009). *Ideja Europe*, Antibarbarus, Zagreb.
- Todorova, M. (2009). *Imagining the Balkans*. Oxford University Press.
- Транскултурна Европа: културна политика у Европи која се мења* (2008) / приредиле Улрике Хана Мајнхоф, Ана Триандафилиду, Београд: Clio.
- Valéry, P. (1919). *The Crisis of the Mind*. Retrieved from www.historyguide.org/europe/valery.html
- Bauman, Z. (2012). *Culture in a Uniting Europe*. Retrieved from http://www.culturecongress.eu/en/europa/bauman_idea_chapter5
- Historical Dictionary of the European Union*. Retrieved from repository.wit.ie/510/1/tob_review_eu_encyclopaedia.htm