Literature and National Identity

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In the nineteenth-century Europe literature played an important role in the development of national identity. In Central and Eastern Europe it was the elite that decided that national identity or national feeling be established. And it also meant that nations should have been established, since a nation—in that modern, nineteenth-century approach—meant a collective mental experience, which of course could be easily translated into the language of collective interests and ambitions of power and expansion. A nation was what had a national feeling. The nation had to be convinced to imagine itself as community. For lack of mass media and even before the boom of press literature was the most obvious means for that purpose.

Therefore, first of all, masses had to be convinced to feel solidarity with their national elites. For the Hungarian elite, for example, it was the most shocking experience in the first decades of the 19th century the way the 1831 Polish uprising was suppressed by the Austrian authorities. (The Austrian dynasty of the Habsburgs was ruling both the Hungarians and a grand proportion of the Poles.) The rebels were Polish noblemen, and the Austrian administration simply promised a certain amount of money...
for every rebel's head somebody gives to them. The Polish peasants gladly killed the
gentry to receive that blood money. When they were asked about their nationality they
answered they were imperial Austrians, even if they spoke Polish and knew no word in
German. In the Hungarian interpretation of the events the revolutionaries acted for the
Polish nation, while the peasants acted against their own interests. However, both the
rebels and the peasants defined themselves in the rather medieval framework of a
nation identical with the gentry. The lesson of that Polish uprising was the need for a
more inclusive notion of nation and of convincing people, i.e., huge, previously
excluded masses that they belong to the Hungarian nation.

Language and national feeling became important factors in European nationalism.
Literature was used as a means of conviction, which resulted in the development of a
self-reflecting sort of literature that discussed its own mission of advertising national
commitment. And one more phenomenon should be mentioned in this context. The
concept of nation was freshly invented, and in Central and Eastern Europe freshly
imported. Language, literature and culture played a central role in the representation of
nation—at least as important as history. Culture in general is not a difficult business for
the founders of a nation or a national spirit: folk tales, costumes, folk songs can be
gathered, described, published. It is a harder task to create or invent national literature.
And it was badly needed, since a valuable nation had literature per definition. In
Hungary this need resulted in at least two kinds of activity. On the one hand, the
heritage of the libraries was carefully scrutinised in search of old Hungarian literature.
The result was a set of texts which could be regarded as literature. Unluckily many of
them were written in Latin, the language of international educated discourse in
Medieval Europe. As a compromise made with the basic rules of language based
national identity, everything written in Latin in the territory of the Hungarian Kingdom
was regarded as Hungarian literature. But some valuable poems in Hungarian were
also found. If they had not been, some could have been forged too. Examples of fake
ancient national literature created in the 19th century were abundant all around
Europe.

On the other hand, the society requested the poets and writers to compose the basic
genres and the basic works of national literature. In Hungary it was not enough that a
good Baroque epic was first published in the 19th century, a national epic had to be
written too. And when it was done by Mihály Vörösmarty, the leading poet of the
Hungarian romanticism, the public relaxed and became proud of it—without feeling
obliged to read it.
So far, so good. The founders of nationalism were successful in transforming reality. New nations and new states were created. But it did not happen without terrible bloodsheds in the 19th and the 20th centuries. Alexander Kiosev described the development of the modern Central and Eastern European societies as self-colonising. The nations of the region transformed their societies to adapt them to a western model. In the post-colonial situation one can be astonished to see how the liberated countries are trying to transform themselves into western-like nations with western-like nationalism. And there is no way to prevent the harm it can do, since even in Europe very few remedies of questionable use were invented against nationalism. The new elites of the post-colonial states are interested in the development of cohesive factors, and nationalism is a well-proven, good old means that can stabilise a country as a political community while stabilising the elite’s positions.

Literary studies never developed independently from political or social phenomena. In the 19th century when literary history was established as a discipline, it was designed to contribute to the formation of national identity. The nation states financed the foundation of departments for national literary history for their own ideological purposes. The comparative literature studies of that time seemed to regard national literatures as closed and integral entities that can be compared on morphological grounds. While Europe experienced the awful consequences of nationalism in the 20th century, with the terrible coda of the Yugoslavian war, literary scholarship tried to carefully renounce its tasks in nation building. Comparative literature studies after World War II focused on the connections between literatures, on their mutual permeability and interdependence. European countries were interested in the elimination or at least diminution of national hatred in favour of cooperation. And there was a democratic ideal as well; knowledge in science or scholarship used to be an important vehicle of social mobility. Erudition used to be the privilege and the shibboleth of the elite, and good education therefore seemed a precondition of the democratization of the society, especially in Eastern Europe. This situation has changed. The masses obviously did not make use of the access to elite culture, and scientific career is no more than an option for advancement in the society now. Literary scholars’ activity in the conciliation of nations seems superfluous, partly because the conciliation was successful between some European nations (and there is no need to conciliate them any more), partly because it seems hopelessly unsuccessful in other regions, and partly because literature is a marginal phenomenon in the present societies that are not trying to base their national pride on cultural achievement any longer.
Why should those in power (be it political or financial power) finance literary scholarship or culture in general in this state of affairs? A very conservative answer deeply rooted in the western tradition and western dichotomies would sound as follows. A human being is composed of mind and body; and since the mind, being the sublime part, is more important than the body, the supreme achievement of the mind, i.e., high culture, is the most important thing a human society can produce.

This statement, however, cannot be completely serious. Diminution of suffering I regard as an even more important goal of human society. But I like literature; I like the products of elite culture and I love discussing them. And I am convinced it is good. Or at least it is not harmful. I hope we can demonstrate that our activity is important for our respective societies as well.

The history of literary scholarship, however, is not a unified story. Although the history narrated above is a more or less reliable narrative of the major trends, there are traditions that contradict it. Literary scholarship in the 19th century and in the first half of the 20th century was mostly committed to nationalism, but there always were scholars trying to promote international understanding. When *Neohelicon*, a journal on comparative literature studies was established, its editors referred to some local, regional traditions in trans-national literary studies. Local traditions of comparative and universal literature studies were emphasised through the name or names of the journal. The name *Neohelicon* was designed to refer to a journal called *Helicon*, which published five volumes between 1930–31. During the 1928 Oslo congress of the international association of historical sciences a *Commission Internationale d'Histoire littéraire moderne* [International Committee for Modern Literary History] was established. This first international association for literary studies held three congresses in the *entre deux guerres* period, the first one in Budapest, Hungary in 1931. The association also launched a journal, which was signed by the publishing house Pantheon: Amsterdam, The Netherlands, but which was actually edited and printed in Debrecen, Hungary, where its director János Hankiss (or as he called himself in his international publications, Jean Hankiss) was living. *Helicon* was a "Revue internationale des problèmes généraux de la littérature" [an international review for the general problems of literature], and it published papers in German, English, Spanish, French and Italian. It had a deep theoretical interest; it always had a separate column for literary genres and for the methods of research. It is one of the local traditions *Neohelicon* wanted to join: an international journal focusing on general problems, which was launched under the auspices of the biggest international organisation for
literary studies, and which was edited in Hungary. As a political deed it advertised the peaceful principles of world literature during the gloomy years of World War II.\(^7\)

The *Neohelicon*’s Latin subtitle *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* refers to another local tradition. It was the title of the first journal on comparative literature studies, published in Kolozsvár, Hungary between 1877–88. Its editors, Sámuel Brassai and Hugó Meltzl were the first literary scholars who tried to harmonise the method of comparison with universal interest. It was a consequence of the polyglot culture in Central Europe and their European literary horizon.\(^8\) Although the majority of its publications were written in German or in Hungarian, *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* was a really polyglot journal, or as its advertisement said: “Unbeschränkt polygolotte, kritisch-aesthetische Fachschrift für Folklore, Weltliteratur, Übersetzungskunst, vergleichende Volksliederkunde und ähnliche vergleichende anthropologisch-ethnographischen Disziplinen” [an unlimitedly polyglot critical and aesthetical journal for folklore, world literature, translation studies, comparative folk song studies and similar comparative studies of anthropology and ethnography]. One issue appeared every fortnight, and it contained rather short papers or short sections of serially published papers. The title was printed in eleven languages on the cover, and for example the first volume of the year 1879 contained items in the following languages: Latin, Hungarian, German, French, English, Italian, Provencal, Romanian and Chinese. The latter was a strophe from a poem by Tchou Wang in French transcription and with a French translation.\(^9\) I find more interesting another “Chinese” publication in another issue; it appeared in the column “Petőfiana”, which usually published items of the international reception of Hungary’s national poet Sándor Petőfi. Schott, a German scholar from Berlin submitted a poem in Tchen-Ki-Tong’s translation called “Tung pi zeu tschy” in German transcription.\(^10\)

Such polyglot, international journals might suggest the existence of a counter-tradition in literary scholarship, on which a non-nationalist approach can be based in the age of globalisation.

Notes:

[1] Of course I am referring to Benedict Anderson’s book: *Imagined Communities*. Verso, London, 1991.

[2] Cf. József Szili, “Westward Hoe, or Half-Way between Eastern and Western Europe” forthcoming in *Neohelicon* 2006/2.

[3] See G.A. Williams, “Romanticism in Wales” in *Romanticism in National Context*, eds. R. Porter &
M. Teich, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988, 31.

[4] George Bisztray, “Awakening Peripheries: The Romantic Redefinition of Myth and Folklore” in Romantic Poetry, ed. Angela Esterhammer, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2003, 225–248.

[5] “Notes on the Self-colonising Cultures” http://www.online.bg/kultura/my_html/biblioteka/bgvtngrd/e_ak.htm.

[6] It means one volume per year, but in 1939–40 only one volume was published because of the congress of the Commission Internationale d'Histoire littéraire moderne in Lyon; in 1939 the first issue of volume II contained some materials about the congress in advance (e.g., some abstracts), and the joint issues 2–3 of volume II in 1940 the congress proceedings.

[7] Vajda, “Lectori salutem” op. cit. 12–13.

[8] Vajda, “Lectori salutem” op. cit. 12.

[9] Tchou Ouang, “Ode inédite chinoise” in Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum 3, 1879/1, 130.

[10] Tchen-Ki-Tong, “Tung pi zeu tschy” in Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum 12, 1888/3, 110–111.

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