# TESTO A FRONTE 48
primo semestre duemilatredici



Numero 48
Ventiquattresimo anno
primo semestre duemilatredici

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*Autorizzazione n. 877 del Tribunale di Milano*
*del 14-12-1989*

*Redazione e Amministrazione:*
Marcos y Marcos, Via Piranesi 10, 20137 Milano
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sito internet: www.marcosymarcos.com
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*Abbonamento annuo*
Italia euro 38,00
Estero euro 45,00

Versamento sul ccp 27180207 intestato a Marcos y Marcos
Via Piranesi 10, 20137 Milano
Gli abbonamenti decorrono dal gennaio di ogni anno.
L'abbonamento nel corso dell'anno dà diritto a ricevere il numero arretrato.

*«Testo a fronte» è curato dalla Sezione di Comparatistica dell'Istituto di Arti, Culture e Letterature Comparate della Libera Università di Lingue e Comunicazione* IULM *di Milano.*

TOWARDS A GLOBAL LITERATURE /
VERSO UNA LETTERATURA GLOBALIZZATA
Edited by Tim Parks and Edoardo Zuccato

# EDITORS' PREFACE

Globalization has added a fourth dimension to literature. Until recently, the life of a literary work was either local, national, or international, or the three of them together. A global life, however, is something else. Though globalization is an obvious perspective for contemporary scientists, sociologists, economists and politicians, it is still invisible to most literary authors and scholars. Many of them have hardly noticed its impact on literature, whereas others refuse to consider it an unprecedented phenomenon. Good literature has always had an international life, they argue. We believe, on the contrary, that there is a radical difference between the international circulation of literature in the past and the globalisation of literature of the last two decades. The reception of Petrarch in Renaissance Europe is not comparable to the global circulation of Rushdie, Pamuk and Auster today. The new digital technologies are not a mere extension of traditional printing and publishing, and the role of English as a global language is only superficially similar to the function of Latin as a language of learning in medieval Europe. There is a quantum leap between these phenomena that cannot be written off with the dubious wisdom of "it-has-always-been-like-this".

One of the key elements that separates international from global literature is the writer's relation to his or her community. Never in the past did authors write their works directly for a planetary public. Their readers were always either local – i.e. regional or national –, or they belonged to a religious community, as with Christian Latin and Islamic Arabic writing, or a community of scholars. Even imperial authors rarely cared for those who lived beyond the borders of their state. Virgil may have thought of Greek readers, but certainly he never took into account Indian, Persian and Chinese audiences, though he knew these people existed.

Writing for a global public opens up fantastic possibilities and imposes draconian rules on the authors who follow this path. There are enticing opportunities for the authors in terms of sales and celebrity, and dramatic consequences for form and style. Delocalisation and abstraction are almost inevitable once one decides to address non-local readers. Any writer who wants to be a successful globetrotter must dose culture-specific references very carefully – unless the writer is American, in which case he or she can fill their books with local details, exploiting the belief that reading America's present means reading the world's future.

A central role in the process of literary globalisation is played by trans-

Tim Parks

# THE PRIZE COMMUNITY

In 1904, three years after the award of the first Nobel prize for literature, to the French poet Sully Prudhomme, the English Football Association chose not to participate in the formation of an International Football Federation (FIFA). They could not see the point. Nor, in 1930, when Sinclair Lewis won the prize, 1934, when Luigi Pirandello won it, or 1938, when the award was taken by Pearl Buck, did England participate in the first three World Cup competitions.

In particular, in 1930, the English objected to the prospect of a ten-day ocean crossing to Uruguay to play teams who meant nothing to them. The first international football game, they pointed out, had been between England and Scotland, in 1872, this when Alfred Nobel was still focused on improving the quality of his dynamite. This annual game against a neighbour was far more significant in the collective British psyche than any encounter with a South American team. Who needs Argentina or Brazil when you have Scotland to play? Indeed the Scottish fixture meant so much and became so explosive that after violence between fans in 1989, when Camilo José Cela won the Nobel, it was suspended, never to be renewed. From then on England and Scotland would seek animosity, significance, and certain defeat, only across the water. Watched at a distance on television, transformed from visceral participation to mere mental obsession, it was safer for everybody.



I am not the first to draw attention to parallel processes of internationalization in awards for sports and the arts. As with many analogies, it is the combination of similarity and difference that is illuminating. For all the different styles of play in different countries and continents, football is a game whose rules can be universally applied: North Korea play Mexico with a Swedish referee and despite one or two contested decisions a result is recorded and one team can pass to the next round without too much discussion.

But can we feel so certain when the Swedish referee judges poems from these two countries that he will pick the right winner? Or even that there is a 'right' winner? Or even a competition; the Mexican did not write his or her poems with the idea of getting a winning decision over the North Korean, or vice versa. Or with a Swedish referee in mind.

At least, we hope not.

The interesting thing, then, about the English refusal to participate in the early World Cups is that, although there was no real obstacle to measuring themselves against teams from far away, they did not feel that this spectacle, the competition for world supremacy, was what the sport was *for*. What mat-

tered was that there be a relation between the communities confronting each other in the stadium; that would give meaning to the game.

Vice versa, what is fascinating about international literary prizes is that the obstacles to choosing between one writer and another are many and significant, yet the appetite for international prizes and for winners is such that people do everything to overcome or overlook those obstacles. So what is the underlying purpose, the function of these prizes? Why the enthusiasm despite the obstacles?

"What a bore", says Alessandro Manzoni, "when we are all speaking in Milanese and somebody from Florence or Rome or Naples comes into the room". Switching to Italian, the fun goes out of the conversation. "You tell me", Manzoni says "if we now have the same readiness and confidence in the words we choose, you tell me if we don't have to use generic and approximate words, where before the special word was ready. We have to fall back on a paraphrase, where before we just had to name things".

Language, *our* language, creates an immediate intimacy, a complicity, an us. Community. In a text, our language, used with native intensity, predisposes the mind to a certain kind of engagement: we are insiders, we are part of the debate. It is *our* debate. To reach out to a wider community, or perhaps to create that community, Manzoni himself rewrote his great novel *The Betrothed* shifting it away from the Italian he was more familiar with, to that very Italian that dampened all conversation. This is one more moment in the long transition from oral poetry and storytelling, shared between a group of people actually present, to the written, the translated, the international. But the essential logic of writing is always to reach out to those not present.



There are gains in this process: more control; something we might call literariness, less visceral, more detached. Peter Stamm talked about this: as a Swiss writing in German, which is not the Swiss German he lives in, to write is to move into a more rarefied, controlled literary world. Stamm speaks highly of control, and his characters are desperate to control their lives. In this more constructed language, the mind is disposed differently.

And there are losses. Or to avoid old polemics perhaps we should just talk about different kinds of experience, that perhaps cannot be measured against each other. In any event, the desire for widespread diffusion usually wins out over the affirmation of the community through language: this is in line with a writer's individual ambition – Manzoni liked his Milanese conversations but wanted to be more widely recognized - and also with a desire that a larger community be formed – in Manzoni's case an Italian community. Today we might talk about a world community, in any case something more extended, notional, more an idea, less binding than the local community. Hence this development also in line with the individual's desire to escape the constrictions of the local, is to escape into a wider space, where one is more likely to be judged ex novo, a decontextualized individual, rather than in reference to place and class and family history.

To have the wider community, to have the international literary prize, we need translation. All texts have to be put on the same level base, which at the moment is English. This is not the translation of the past which happily appropriated foreign texts for their own cultures altering whatever did not fit, imposing Dryden's heroic couplet on Homer or Italian dialects on American slang. Now we must persuade ourselves that translation and original, if not identical are, without too much embarrassing discussion, the same book, everywhere. Otherwise what world community is it, if Harry Potter is not really the same Harry Potter in Serbia and Szechwan? If the Nobel prize winner is not the same winner in China and Canada and Germany? Translators are thus under growing pressure to remain strictly faithful, while at the same time commercial pressures demand that their work be fluent. They are not, as in the past, bringing the foreign literature into a strong national culture, they are making it alive in another territory of the same world culture. "We must believe in poetry translation", said Thomas Tranströmer who won last year's Nobel, "if we want to believe in world literature". And we understand that the poet just does not want to hear arguments against translation because he has already decided to believe. World literature is a vision, it is the zeitgeist. Creating one world has become part of the function of literature.

That is the vision. Is it really happening?

Much of Tranströmer's own poetry was translated by Robert Robertson who admitted that he did not speak Swedish well, but pointed out that Robert Lowell who had translated earlier poems by Tranströmer hardly spoke it at all. Robertson describes a process where his Swedish girlfriend gives him a literal line-by-line translation into English, then reads the Swedish to him to give him "the cadences". In short, we assume that poetry is made up of a literal semantic sense on the one hand and a tone, or music, on the other. The one is mastered by labouring over the text, the other intuited by listening to someone who speaks the language read it aloud. Literature can be taken apart and put back together again. It has a meaning and a tone. There are things that can be abstracted. Things that can be separately reinvented. This is the kind of process one has to believe in, if one wants to believe in world literature. I leave it to you to imagine yourselves explaining Montale line by line to a lover, and giving him/her the cadences.

But what about prose?

I have served on the juries of two international literary prizes: the IMPAC and at present the Booker International Prize. Although books are accepted from any part of the world, they have to be available in English translation, which of course excludes a great deal. As one alternates between books written in English and books translated into English, one's apprehension of a different aura is immediate. There is a rightness, or inevitability, about an original that is subtly absent in a translation. All the same, a book that is already, like Stamm's, constructed in a language that is not his spoken language, perhaps translates more effectively than one which is deeply engaged with a mother tongue, with the way people speak and think in this language, the way this or that culture is made out of these words.

So a certain kind of text is at a disadvantage, when we come to comparing apple and oranges in the international prize market and consecrating greatness. Unless, unless... the book, the poem, was written in the language the judges themselves speak. Then the density of language is suddenly a positive factor. I believe this was a case in different ways with Tranströmer's Nobel and Philip Roth's Booker International. International prizes given to writers working in the language of the judges. The biennial Booker International has been awarded four times. Three of the winners wrote in English. The shortlist has varied in length from 8-18. On average two thirds of the shortlisted authors have written in English.



The desire to have works that can be shared worldwide privileges abstraction, strong literary tropes, focus on ideas, or, alternatively, on plot, in any event, things that can be translated and transposed. If there is local detail, or savouring of linguistic habits, it must be incidental to the book's main qualities, it must not require insider recognition. We remember that in his will, Alfred Nobel spoke of his prize going to a novelist who showed 'an ideal tendency'. Of course he didn't say this because of any reflections he might have made on translation or transmissibility; it was part of his project of saving his soul through his bequest: good writing, the kind I am sponsoring, must be morally good. There must be *abstractable goodness*. In general *it must be possible to talk about the work and justify one's decisions*. Let's remember that the period of the international literary prize has also been the period of a massive expansion in the teaching of literature. We know that certain books lend themselves more easily to being talked about and taught, which is very different from being savoured. There are powerful forms of seduction which elude easy analysis.

"If a book is really good, it will reach out to everyone, the world over". It was one of the directors of the Edinburgh Book Festival who told me this. Like a belief in the translatability of poetry it goes together with the determination to "believe in world literature" and international literary prizes and of course literary festivals, whose rapid expansion is intimately related to the internationalization of literature.

Let us consider some implications:

The idea of the universal appeal of fine literature exactly coincides with commercial convenience; the better a book is, the more it transcends its local origins, the more people it can be sold to around the world.

How can this be a bad thing?

Another advantage of the belief is that we never need feel anxious that we might be missing out a some truly great work of art because we don't know the culture that produced it: for if the work were really great, it would, by definition, reach out to us; if it doesn't reach out, if it doesn't *translate*, it's not worth our, *nor anyone else's* attention. Basically, if I believe that all great art has universal appeal, I can feel confident that I am the arbiter of everything and that local cultures are less important than the things we all share.

In his recent book, *The Novel, an alternative history, beginnings to 1600*, the American professor Steven Moore claims that all long narratives from the earliest times to the present day and in whatever culture can be approached the same way we would approach a modern novel. Here he is talking about early Egyptian fiction:

> When fiction-writing resumed during the Ramesside period (c. 1292-1070 BCE), Egyptian writers invented a few more genres, like the war story, the ghost story and the fairy tale, but mostly pushed magic realism to bizarre lengths. In "The Tale of Two Brothers", for example, an upright young man named Bata lives with his older brother Anubis, a landowner. One day, Anubis's wife tries to seduce Bata, but he refuses her. Angry, the woman tells her husband that Bata tried to assault her. Anubis then hides himself behind the stable door to kill his brother when he returns from the fields, but a talking cow warns Bata of Anubis's plan. He runs off but is pursued by his brother, so he prays to the sun-god for protection, who obliges by creating a wall of water between the two brothers, infested with crocodiles. Then things *really* get weird. To demonstrate his innocence, Bata cuts off his phallus and throws it into the water (where a catfish swallows it).
>
> It's a remarkable testament to the colourful imagination of one Egyptian fantasist.

What is more remarkable is that all this is presented with no context – perhaps to the original audience it was not weird at all that Bata cuts his phallus off, perhaps it is exactly what they expected. Moore makes no reference to the translation process, from hieroglyphics. It's an extreme case, but it reveals again the tendency of our zeitgeist, to make the individual, any individual, a sovereign arbiter in a world where his own culture, whatever it may be, provides all the

context that is required. I would not be surprised if we did not soon have juries deciding retrospective prizes for international fiction in the 14th century, 15th century, 16th century, seeking to choose between Milton and Moliere, St John of the Cross and Cervantes; this without any need to study those periods, entirely in relation to our own individual experience, our own politics, perhaps, worrying that Shakespeare might have been anti-semitic, or Boccaccio misogynist.

The conclusion I am pushing to is this: that while the ideal of the single world community is an entirely honourable thing, nevertheless when literature (like football and athletics) becomes an instrument for creating that community, as in the past it has been an instrument for creating national communities, then there are other implications which may not be so attractive. The author's ego thrives on this expansion of his territory; the reader feels he can know and recognize and judge literary quality from all over the globe, without moving out of his language and culture. Rather than inviting us towards an experience of the local - not in terms of facts and figures, politics and plot - but the actual ethos and aura of place and culture, we have the creation of a loose culture of circulating ideas, abstracted from context, giving readers the illusion of travelling far and wide in a global community, made up of things that, however superficially exotic, he or she can always understand; while all that cannot easily be abstracted, cannot be successfully translated, is devalued if not removed from view.