

ASSESSMENT

Of the Dissertation *Is the Nobel Prize an Award for World Literature?* by Prof. Ph.D. Amelia Licheva for awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" Professional Field 2.1 "Philology" ("Theory of Literature")

In her dissertation *Is the Nobel Prize an Award for World Literature?* Amelia Licheva explores a concept which has been with us at least since J.W. Goethe made it popular: the concept of world literature. One of Goethe's arguments in favour of this concept evokes the increase in the speed of communication; one of his fears concerns the hugeness of the phenomenon. If this is how things looked two centuries ago, what should we say today? The concept did create an object and yet, as Tzvetan Stoyanov put it in the 1960s, „Today everybody believes that world literature exists, everybody speaks of it. However, it is not an easy task to delineate it: there must exist such a thing, but no one has ever seen it definitely or distinctly.¹“ It would appear, then, that world literature is one of those objects which – without necessarily subscribing to Timothy Morton's object oriented philosophy – could be described as hyperobjects: it is massively distributed in time and space; it is surely a very long-lasting product of direct human manufacture; it is viscous and nonlocal (any "local manifestation" of a hyperobject is not directly the hyperobject²); it involves profoundly different temporalities and it does occupy a high-dimensional phase space that results in its being invisible to humans for stretches of time!² As Bogdan Bogdanov³ told me once regarding his move from history of West European literature to (just) Old Greek literature, “it is inhuman to have the history of West European literature as your research area.” But then, it was just West European literature, not world literature! In recent years the inhuman dimensions of this hyperobject has given rise to various strategies for making it observable: from Franco Moretti's graphs, maps and distant reading⁴ to the ever more pervasive employment of specialized software.

Amelia Licheva approaches the protean and amorously viscous nature of this hyperobject with the help of – to put it in terms of the title of one of her books⁵ - a binocle and a microscope, i.e. through the interaction of several perspectival frames. The binocle and the microscope are devices, to be sure, but they are the type of classical devices that do not take upon themselves the work of the human intellect. This is the first frame of Licheva's study: it is human. It does not rely on machines in the processing of the inhuman mass of

¹ Цветан Стоянов, „Идеалът за „Световната Литература““, *Културата като общение*. София: Български писател, 1988, с. 65.

² Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, p.1.

³ A prolific, versatile and, in Bulgaria, immensely influential scholar (1940-2016). In English, see Bogdan Bogdanov, *Reading and Its Functioning: From Ancient Greek Literature to Any One World*. Berlin: Osteuropa-Zentrum, 2010.

⁴ Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History*. London: Verso, 2007; *Distant Reading*. London: Verso, 2013.

⁵ Амелия Личева, *Литература. Бинокъл. Микроскоп*. София: Сиела, 2013.

the otherwise still predominantly human world literature. In the future we will probably have to define such an approach as “warm-blooded” and “manual;” it will inevitably have to rely on unforeseen proximities and cunning craftsmanship - as will be the case here.

The second framework is temporal: in her abstract Licheva defines it as a “momentary incision into the contemporary state of the debate (my translation, MN).” This does not mean that historical reference is altogether absent. There is plenty of it, but it is subjected to the need to highlight certain aspects of current discussions. The cut captures, consequently, present day effects of post-communist amnesia. If communist regimes in Eastern Europe gave up on the idea of world revolution, they nevertheless preserved one vital particle of this ambitious project: the project of world literature and culture. Publishing books in translation was massive, systematic, and guided by plans and programs (in Bulgaria, for example, there were the multi-volume series *World Classics*, *Panorama*, *World Poets*, *Poetic Globe* – I just mention the ones where the global intention is explicit). In the Soviet Union they did not just translate, they commissioned the creation of literatures in the languages which did not yet have writing. Was this a good, or a bad thing? Every language was supposed to have literature. The Soviet-Russian *Library of World Literature* published, in the course of ten years 1967-1977, 25800 literary works by 3235 authors from over 80 countries.⁶ Amelia Licheva refers to Galin Tihanov (pp. 6, 88, 90) whose writing is concerned with taking into account this (among others) forgotten times and locations of world literature⁷ but the referral does not involve this aspect of his work and hence leaves no trace on her own perspective. In short, the utopia we had here was to remove the repressive ideological filters of the communist regimes but keep the “world” part. Something else happened, instead, and Licheva’s study reflects this change with the next frame delimiting it: I will call this frame anglo-phono-centric.

By this I do not mean written in English: English, being the lingua franca around here, is the language of all sorts of writing including a great part of the work of Galin Tihanov. I mean, rather, a crossover of post-colonial theory and the critique of Eurocentrism specific for the Anglo-American academia. We might regard the employment of this frame as an instance of, to put it in Alexander Kiossev’s term, self-colonization and, from this point of view, as a continuation of the 19th century Bulgarian rhetoric of catching up with the “West.” Or, which will be my suggestion here, we could assess it as joining this specific debate in the course of which certain invigorating twists and turns will occur justifying the choices Licheva made. In itself, the debate is comprehensive enough and Licheva’s dissertation offers an engaging account of the various positions in it, while delineating her own take on contemporary factors like mass media, the market, literary hegemonies, the canon, small literatures and languages and – with a special emphasis and, once again a human perspective – the role of translation. She thus reaches a summing up which has a normative rather than descriptive or analytic character:

⁶ <http://www.hi-edu.ru/e-books/HB/22-4.htm>

⁷ See for example Tihanov’s discussion of Nikolai Konrad, a Russian Sinologist and Japanologist whose work has deeply inflected my own view on world literature. Galin Tihanov, *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, “The Location of World Literature,” Vol 44, No 3 (2017): 469-470.

„The concept of world literature which I endorse does not treat language along the lines of original and translation but in terms of the world it constructs. I believe that contemporary world literature should be able to articulate the problems, fears and hopes of contemporary people; i.e. it should be a timely, reliable, comprehensible, unprejudiced, and dialogically open discussion. “ (99-100)

This view is then inscribed in two further frames delimiting the hyperobject of world literature. The one which forms the central part of the dissertation provides an analysis of the Nobel prize for literature. This analysis allows a discussion of world literature through the prism of the changing policies of the Nobel committee juxtaposing them to the Nobel speeches delivered by various authors. The other frame is genre: the dissertation focuses on the realistic novel. Ultimately, this approach is driven by something which Amelia Licheva calls “circulation of trauma” (152) – global problems, big crises, displacement, terrorism, refugees. The circulation of trauma, hence, determines the choice of the writers she discusses more closely, alternating the “binocle” of the debates around world literature with the “microscope” of concrete analysis. And, finally, there is an appendix providing an overview of contemporary Bulgarian literature as and in so far as world literature.

In her abstract Amelia Licheva enumerates what she sees as her contributions to the topic. I second them. There is something I would like to add: her dissertation is an invitation to think literature not through the languages and nations which, so to say, stand behind it but, rather, through the worlds it builds in the course of – to put it once again with the words of Tzvetan Stoyanov – “the grand conversation of humanity.” This challenge – for research, teaching but also publishing – is of paramount importance today; from this point of view, Licheva dissertation is not only a study but also a proposal for change.

In conclusion: Amelia Licheva’s dissertation *Is the Nobel Prize an Award for World Literature?* competently explores an important contemporary problem and provides guidelines for change in both the study and the teaching of literary processes. I strongly endorse awarding the scientific degree "Doctor of Science" Professional Field 2.1 "Philology" ("Theory of Literature") to Prof. Ph.D. Amelia Licheva.

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