

Globalization and Conferencing Comparative Literature in Egypt and Slovenia

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**Babis Dermitzakis,**

**"Globalization and Conferencing Comparative Literature in Egypt and Slovenia"**

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**Abstract:** In his article, "Globalization and Conferencing Comparative Literature in Egypt and Slovenia," Babis Dermitzakis discusses two recent conferences in the discipline of comparative literature. The former conference was held on the topic of literary criticism in Cairo and the latter on the genre of the romantic epic poem in Ljubljana. The implicit and explicit objective of both conferences was to discuss as well as to demonstrate a stand against globalization with specific reference to culture and literature. The conference participants as much as the organizers intended to show that cultures and countries peripheral to economic, political, and cultural centres -- in particular the global impact of American culture -- possess important products of culture, including such in literature and in the study of literature, that is, in literary and culture theory. Although acknowledging English as the tool of communication serving the objectives of globalization, the argument is proposed that there are possibilities to avoid or at least to mitigate the marginalization of peripheral cultures and their scholarship and to establish meaningful dialogue with scholars globally.

**Babis DERMITZAKIS**

### **Globalization and Conferencing Comparative Literature in Egypt and Slovenia**

In the last few months I attended two international conferences in comparative literature, one in Cairo, Egypt and another in Ljubljana, Slovenia. The former, on the theme "Literary Criticism on the Threshold of the New Century," was organized by the Egyptian Society for Literary Criticism and Ain Shams University, in collaboration with Misr University for Science and Technology, 20-24 November 2000; the latter, on the theme "The Romantic Epic Poem," was organized by the Department of Slavic Languages of the University of Ljubljana, 4-6 December 2000. The Ljubljana conference was dedicated to the 200th anniversary of the Slovene poet, France Preseren (for the web site of the Ljubljana conference including a post-conference report by the organizer, Marko Juvan, see <<http://www.ff.uni-lj.si/center-slo/simpozij-eng.html>>).

In the opening plenaries of both conferences we heard about one specific item several times, namely the topic of "globalization" (for bibliographies on the topic, see, e.g., Casey <<http://www.govst.edu/users/gddcasey/libarts/milleniumbib2.htm>> [inactive]; Leung). After the Cold War and the demise of Soviet colonization, it appears that globalization and its implications pose a new threat to culture and society. In order to preserve their identities, cultural and social, cultures of small peoples and countries strive to avoid the scylla of globalization without falling upon the charybdis of marginalization. Small cultures on the peripheries from centers with large economic and cultural output and production and thus with influence and impact face the demands of globalization, in particular globalization driven by North America and the technologically advanced countries of Europe. In a small way and ideally, gatherings of minds such as at international conferences in the humanities and social sciences represent a mitigating factor in the problematics of globalization. The examples of the Cairo and Ljubljana conferences, each one in its own way, show that at least in regards to culture there are some means of defence. In a general and wide context, the lines of defense against the negative impacts of globalization cannot, of course, take the form of an embargo of culture products from the West. Rather, the question is how to promote local culture products in the world market, how to make them known as widely as possible so that cultures in the peripheries can realize their own potential. In particular, in the fields of the humanities and the social sciences scholars from the peripheries deserve the opportunity to be read and dialogued with and thus conferences such as the ones in Cairo and Ljubljana serve as essential vehicles to bridge the local with the global.

Then again, it could be argued that in a market economy every deserving culture product will find its way. Perhaps in theory. As we know, this is unfortunately not always the case. Some writers, like the Greek Nikos Kazantzakis or the Czech-French Milan Kundera may take a formidable presence -- both intellectually and financially -- in the world book market, but they are exceptions and not the rule. They achieved a presence by the fortuitous overlap of several elements and factors such as the contemporaneity of their production, elements of universality in their work, the right place(s), time, and length of promotion by the right publishers and the world of critical attention, the genre of their texts (novel), etc. Some scholars research the ways in which an author and various mechanisms in support of his/her work and the data suggest the many ways of landing fame and recognition; the data also shows that much of the resulting fame and success is based on elaborate mechanisms of orchestration and organization within the system of literature (see, for example, Dahab; De Glas; Janssen; Van Rees and Vermunt). As expected, much of the discussion revolved around the question: How many Preserens are there in the cultures of the peripheries who would otherwise rightly receive a wider international recognition? In other words, what happens with texts of peripheral cultures and literatures? And what happens with the theoretical and critical work of scholars of the same peripheral cultures? Here are two examples: The Slovenic national poet France Preseren (1800-1849) and the Ukrainian national poet Taras Hryhorovych Shevchenko (1814-1861). From a comparative point of view, these two cultural icons in their cultures, respectively, have much in common including such as that they were contemporaries and their countries were under foreign occupation. Three papers in the conference dealt with Shevchenko's work: Nina Tsamata's (Kiev) "The 'Caucasus' of Taras Shevchenko: The

First Lyrical Poem of Ukrainian Romanticism," Mihajilo Naenko's (Kiev) "Ukrainian Reminiscences in European Romanticism," and Olena Dzubaja's (Kiev) "Preseren and Shevchenko." There were also papers with comparative approaches about Preseren's work and the work of other poets, mostly Njegos, another outstanding South-Slavic (from Montenegro) poet, and Pushkin. In all cases the point is that although the work of these poets is not inferior to the work of many of their Western contemporaries such as Byron and Shelley, they are virtually unknown beyond their own cultural space.

While in literature some outstanding prose writers and poets may pass the local borders and become widely recognized, things are by far more difficult as regards to theorists of literature. One needs only to remember how late Mikhail Bakhtin came to be known in the West, for example. If he had been known earlier, perhaps literary theory would have taken a much different course than the one we know. Similarly, Vladimir Propp and the Russian formalists in general are other typical examples. We know that without their work French structuralism would not have come into being and thus, just like in the case of producers of primary texts, the question again is how many other Bakhtins and Propps exist in other countries waiting to be discovered and how many may not be discovered at all? But this question is of course irrelevant, really. What is more important is to understand the processes of recognition of originally peripheral scholars such as an Edward Said, Julia Kristeva, or Tzvetan Todorov. The problematics of knowledge transfer, recognition and adaptation into the canons of literary and culture theory in the cases of peripheral origins is yet to be written and at this point there is virtually no work extant on this topic. The Cairo conference tried to show that the theory of literature cannot remain to be a monopoly of the Western cultures and that scholarship of the peripheries must and indeed is able to articulate at least parallel schools of thought in literary and culture theory. It is in this context that the organizers of the Cairo conference -- Ezz Eldin Ismail and Ahmad Abdul Fattah -- deserve praise, namely with regard to their efforts to accommodate the participation of a large number of scholars from the peripheries. The range of themes and topics presented and discussed at the Cairo conference included globalization and literary theory, hypertext and its uses in the teaching of literature, language and desire, global migratory experiences, language and multi-media, globalization and postmodernism, criticism as a cultural institution, meta-criticism, applied studies in literary criticism, discourse analysis, the future of criticism, feminism as discourse and theory and non-theory.

The paper that in my opinion responded most to the theme of peripherality of both conferences is perhaps that of Bill Ashcroft (New South Wales), entitled "Resistance and Transformation." He focuses on the former colonies, but his arguments have a wider range and impact. Ashcroft argues that the problem with resistance is that the perception of it as a simple oppositionality has locked it into the very binary which Europe established to define its others. Invariably, political struggle has been seen to be contrary to the modes of adaptation and appropriation in which post-colonial societies often engage. Resistance, if conceived as something much more complex than a binary opposition, can be seen to be effected in that wide range of processes to which post-colonial societies have subjected imperial power. The most sustained, far reaching, and effective interpretation of post-colonial resistance has been the "resistance to absorption," that is, the appropriation and transformation of dominant technologies for the purpose of reinscribing and representing post-colonial cultural identity. And this is the case in not only dominant technologies but also in dominant West-generated cultural currents. Wang Ning's (Beijing) paper is perhaps a good example of this view, showing the appropriation of post-modernism in China, and the fruitful versions it generated. Post-modernism, Wang contends, has now become a globalizing phenomenon covering almost all the aspects in contemporary intellectual life; however, it produced and produces different versions in "third world" cultures. For example, in China Wang traces the following versions: The radical experimentation of the avant-garde undermining the official literary discourse and previous modernist literature, the event of new realist fiction as a silent reaction to avant-garde experimentation, the problematics of consumer orientation in current literary production and the cultural industries, the impact of deconstructive criticism, and, most importantly for the context of the conference, the post-colonial attempt at deconstructing the

Western colonization of Chinese culture and literary discourse. Wang argues that postmodernism has become pluralistic both in the West and the East.

Kamal Abu-Deeb (London) in his paper with the characteristic title "The Collapse of Totalizing Discourse and the Rise of Marginalized/Minority Discourses," discusses the Arab version of modernism, *hadâth*, a version linked to Islamic political and social thought. Abu-Deeb suggests that while *hadâth* is now receding, it gives prominence to a more personal, anti- or non-ideological art, an art evolving outside the space of consensus. Globalization cannot be the only alternative to resist marginalization. Perhaps a return to internationalism, as perceived by Marx and Engels, as a world brotherhood not only of the proletariat but of all people of all the nations, with equal status given to all countries, may an alternative. Internationalism, not globalism, ought to be our aspiration and thus the fruitful exchange of cultural products and not the economic absorption of the weak ought to be the objective. At the Ljubljana conference this idea of cultural interchange was more than once stressed in the context that cultural influences do not exploit but enrich. In scholarship as presented at the Ljubljana conference, influence studies thus appeared in a novel way, that is, in the context of positive internationalism. In other words, while romanticism is acknowledged as of a Western European origin, its influence in peripheral cultures and literatures is viewed as one of enrichment. This fusion of local and global, the "glocal," a neologism often used at the Cairo conference, can be applied effectively with regards to the processes of cultural production. Thus, notions and the results of the national versus the international does not have to suggest opposition and contrariness. At the Ljubljana conference, in her paper "The National and International in Lermontov's Romantic Poems," Julija A. Sozina's (Moscow) shows effectively the poetic representation of the notion. In the case of Lermontov, romanticism means, Sozina argues, "international." And again, while romanticism is acknowledged to have been created in the West, aspects of it can be found in cultures of the periphery, as Mihajilo Naenko (Kiev) argues in his paper mentioned previously, where he traces elements of romanticism in Ukrainian poetic works of previous centuries, one of them dating back as far as the twelfth century. Romanticism, although a wider literary trend, was generated in the contexts of national self-discovery and thus in a sense it represented resistance to the "globalizing" tendencies of the emerging nineteenth century. This notion appears in Joep Leerssen's (Amsterdam) paper entitled "Epic, Romantic, or Both?," where he discusses the apparent contradiction of the collective "epic" folk creation with the individualistic romantic hero. In Leerssen's view, the merging of the romantic hero with the anonymous folk hero -- the national with the international, the local with the global -- is a notion worthy of further consideration. With regard to the official focus of the Ljubljana conference, France Preseren, the translator of Preseren's major work *Krst pri Savici* (*The Baptism on the Savica: A Tale in Verse*, 1985), Henry R. Cooper (London), spoke about his two translations of the poem. In a new volume, Cooper and Tom Priestly (Alberta), published a new version of *The Baptism* (1999). Priestly also presented a paper, "Sound Symbolism in the Rhymes of *Krst Pri Savici*."

Overall, the quality of the papers has been very high at both conferences. I do hope that the organizers of both conferences will take up my suggestion to place the papers in some form -- either as proceedings or even as books of selected papers -- online, precisely for the benefit of scholars everywhere and including the peripheries. In addition to the focus on the problematics of globalization, another characteristic of the two conferences was the restriction of the languages used. In Cairo, the presentations were made only in Arabic and English, while in Ljubljana, besides Slovenian, Russian was also used. As we are all aware, English has by now taken the status of a new lingua franca, in a process slowly developing since the Second World War and that has been accelerated in the '90s by the internet. English is the language of the globalizers, which the peripheries must adapt to and to adopt if they want to avoid to be more marginalized than already by the law of numbers and economic and political prerogatives, again based on the law of numbers. The resistance against marginalization is of course resistance against globalization. English as a tool allows people from and in the cultures of the peripheries to communicate and to participate globally and to gather the attention of the centers. I do not speak Swahili and my colleague Egara Kabaji from Kenya does not speak Greek but we can communicate in English. And when it comes to money, English as the lingua franca diminishes the expenses of a conference;

simultaneous translation is prohibitively expensive. In Ljubljana, this was the primary consideration for having translations from Slovenian into English, a language everybody is expected to understand while presentations in Russian were not translated. In Cairo there was no simultaneous translation either to or from English. There was, however, a summary given in English immediately afterwards, which permitted non-Arabic speaking participants to take part in the discussions. And, of course, there were abstracts published in English in a small volume available to all conference participants. In Ljubljana the abstracts in a similar volume available to the participants were published in the language of the presentation. This created the shortcoming that the case of parallel sessions we were unable to appreciate the contents of a paper in another session when in Slovenian or in Russian. In Cairo, where the conference rooms were larger and there were more participants, cameras were provided, so that everyone could see the speaker, no matter where a participant was seated.

The hospitality of the organizers at both conferences was excellent. The hotel expenses of participants were provided to all participants at both conferences, a rare treat these days. In Cairo the conference took place in the beautiful Paradise Hotel, where we stayed and had our lunches and dinners. In Ljubljana we stayed in the wonderful Hotel Union, but the conference took place in a governmental building, a short walk away from the hotel. Because of this, the organizers provided participants with a small amount of honoraria quite enough to have our lunches at one of the nearby restaurants. The two conferences discussed briefly here are of importance not only to the participants but to the discipline of comparative literature, a field that is defined as international and global. As the papers and the discussions both at the presentations and after suggest, while aspects of the globalization versus localization debate are indeed of importance and problematic, the comparative perspective may indeed be a framework of good use, both ideologically and when applied in scholarship. I hope that the landscape of scholarship so strongly dominated by the notion of *versus* rather than exploring a combination of the two approaches and the debate played out mostly in the spheres of influence of scholarship in and departments of English would pay attention to the said comparative perspective. In addition, it appears to me that the matter of the periphery ought to be more often discussed, both in theory and application, as demonstrated in and by the conferences at Cairo and Ljubljana.

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