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World Novel Today

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Panel: World Novel Today. The author discusses the state of the novel internationally.

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World novel today

By Laurynas Katkus (Lithuania)

When I learned I would be participating in the panel entitled “World novel today”, my first reaction was: boy, that’s nice! Not because I have deep insights into the theme, but because of the contrary –I hoped it would allow me to discover new trends in fiction.

Then I started thinking about my reaction to this theme, which turned out to be very symptomatic. Writers are constantly following what is happening in the world of literature, aren’t they? I am best placed to speak of Lithuania and Eastern Europe, where I can tell the curiosity and hunger there is really great. A Russian poet, Osip Mandelstam, once defined the essence of his writing as “Nostalgia for world culture”.

Nowadays, due to information technologies, it is possible to keep your nostalgia at bay by staying informed, and maybe even over-informed, as quickly and easily as never before.

This information is somewhat ghostly, but it is not placeless. The nodes of information, real and virtual, loom large in Western Europe and, increasingly in the last forty to fifty years, in North America. And I guess the most frequent reaction, which comes after getting better acquainted with the literature of these “nodes”, is a kind of resentment. You say to yourself: hey, they are not THATextraordinary; we are on par with them in many respects. Why do we know so much about them, while they know so little of us?

Some think that inequality and injustice are features of the culture of a given “node”. I would agree that in many cases, the preferences and degrees of attention devoted to certain works do not correspond to their literary significance. But I also suspect that quite a few complaints about “cultural imperialism” are driven by the wish that the country and language of the person or entity who complains will become the center, the “node”. I doubt that if this came to pass, the situation would change drastically for the better. But more importantly, I believe that the paradoxical nature of literary systems are at work here: literature is incredibly free and egalitarian in one respect, but very choosy, picky and aristocratic in another respect.

I believe we have to take into account another paradox inherent in literature – that it does not develop in linear terms. I guess this is something everybody would agree on in theory, but still we tend to forget that sometimes. My formation as a person and a writer took place in the late ‘80s and ‘90s. This coincided with an enormous wave of postmodern literature and theory. I remember how many writers and critics were saying that fiction had become metafiction, a game of narration techniques, a play with pop-cultural genres...and that the novel, which tries to authentically reproduce the social and economical milieu of a hero etc. had become forever passé. But now, a couple of decades later, we are seeing a significant renaissance of such themes. Here, I will only name the most well-known one—Jonathan Franzen.

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So I am sure it is always important to look out for “another way” in literature; and to not fully give in to fads and advertising (including self-advertizing) which has also become stronger and more pervasive over the last few decades.

So to conclude, I think we have not achieved perfect equality and symphony between different authors and works of fiction, be they Western or Eastern, big or small; but at the same time, I believe that over the last couple of decades, thanks to a different political climate and postmodern theory, there is more equilibrium and diversity on the world literary scene than ever before. As a Lithuanian writer I feel this very strongly: the situation in my country twenty years ago was incomparable to what it is now. The fact that I am sitting here in front of you is proof of that.