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The re-transnationalization of literary criticism

Critical and public discussion of foreign literature in newspapers and magazines has traditionally served as a source of information and guidance not only for a broad readership, but also for "people in the business", for publishers and authors. When that discussion disappears, or loses its perspectives and becomes one-sided, this has consequences for the literary institution as a whole, writes Eurozine's editor-in-chief Carl Henrik Fredriksson.

Literary criticism in the narrower, European sense of the term — meaning texts which discuss and criticize recently published books — is today a very national affair. Almost all books reviewed in daily newspapers, weeklies and journals are published in the same country in which the review appears. Single reviews or general overviews of as-yet-untranslated books written in other parts of the world — whether poetry, short stories, or novels — are extremely rare.

This has not always been the case. Not so long ago, newspapers and magazines regularly reported on and discussed contemporary literature published outside their respective domestic scenes. Many publications even had their own "literary correspondents" stationed in Paris, Rome, and Madrid (or New York, Moscow, and Berlin). The focus was, of course, on the "bigger" literatures, French, German, Spanish, Italian and English, but at least some efforts were made to widen the horizons of an educated and interested audience.

In fact, during some periods and in some places, the discussion of foreign literature was so extensive and lively that it turned into a problem for the publishing business. In 1953, Åke Runnquist, editor of *BLM*, one of Sweden's most influential literary journals, grumbled about the daily newspapers writing *too much* and *too early* about foreign language books. Many books were being reviewed on the very day they appeared in the original language, wrote Runnquist. The downside to this alertness, he continued, was that when these books appeared in translation — and most did! — public discussion about them had already subsided and as a result the translations did not sell as well as they could or should have.¹

Two years later, in 1955, Runnquist repeated his lamentation — but not without a certain amount of satisfaction that some of the bigger newspapers had started to face up to their responsibility and review important foreign language books twice: when they were first published in the original language and again when the translation appeared.²

Today, this type of outlook is almost completely limited to occasional themed issues and focal points published by literary journals. Even in this small sector

of publishing, the situation is far from satisfying: continuity has gone, and when a focal point or a themed issue is presented (often covering 50 or 100 years of a country's literary history) emphasis is placed on literary texts. If there is any literary criticism at all, it usually deals with one particular author. Articles painting a broad picture of what is really contemporary are rare.

The situation is not equally bad everywhere. In Germany you can — even in the cultural sections of the major daily newspapers — occasionally find well-informed reviews of, or at least comments on, newly published books from, for example, Poland, Ukraine, or Russia. Occasionally. In most other parts of Europe there is simply nothing.

There are several reasons for this development: the general decline of the literary institution, changes in the publishing business, and, paradoxically, even "globalization". But whatever reason one chooses to emphasize, the conclusion will be the same: there is an urgent need — in the ideal as well as the practical or professional sense — for a "re-transnationalization" of literary criticism.

The situation that editor Åke Runnquist complained about in 1955 seems to us, only fifty years later, almost antediluvian. What contemporary publisher would not like to have the problems Runnquist describes? His interpretation of what he saw as the main dilemma — that public discussion of foreign literary works was already over when the translations finally appeared — might be somewhat over-sensitive, but it illustrates very well the importance of contextualization and mediation for writing's passage from one literature to another.

Critical and public discussion of foreign literature in newspapers and magazines has traditionally served as a source of information and guidance not only for a broad readership, but also for "people in the business", for publishers and authors.³ When that discussion disappears, or loses its perspectives and becomes one-sided, this has consequences for the literary institution as a whole.

To continue the Swedish example, the *National Bibliography of the Royal Library* from 2004 shows that roughly 75 per cent of all literary works translated into Swedish was translated from English (7 per cent from Norwegian; 3.6 from French; 2 from German and Danish respectively; 1.2 from Russian; all others 1 per cent or less).⁴ The trend of these statistics is not exclusive to Sweden; the proportions look, *mutatis mutandis*, pretty much the same in most European countries. The usual reaction to such figures is to point the finger at the publishers and lay all the blame on negligent and unimaginative economists who have taken over a business that was once the stronghold of cosmopolitanism and the guarantor of the free flow of words and ideas. This is, at best, only part of the truth. Just as responsible for the current situation is a literary criticism that has lost its outlook — and lost the media in which that outlook can be presented. At a time when publishers, more than ever before, would need the full panoply of literary critics to help them find their way — at a time when the critic's plaudits and polemics, his pointers and his perceptiveness, could really make a difference — at that critical moment the critics fail to deliver.

BLM, the journal in which Åke Runnquist bemoaned the fate of translations, was wound up in 2004, long after it had given up its ambition to present an overview of European literatures. And the interest and alertness Runnquist attributed to the daily newspapers have been replaced with the exact opposite.

The cultural pages of otherwise ambitious papers seem to define foreign literature written in any other language than English as *a priori* "exclusive" and therefore hardly worth the effort.

Today, the emergence of new genres and media has meant that foreign literatures that have been maltreated or neglected by the larger media are once more being discussed. In the Swedish context the "bloggish" website *Salongen* (The Salon) is a fine example.⁵ Partly based in Germany but published in Swedish, it feeds off the German cultural sphere's close relations with many Eastern European literatures and makes Swedish readers realize that they have previously missed out on much of the European aesthetic discourse. However, the individual enthusiasm that tends to characterize these new literary forums is not unproblematic: their approach is often uncritically affirmative instead of exploratorily critical, advocating instead of analyzing, listing instead of contextualizing. Furthermore, these informal and often short-lived spaces for literary and semi-critical discourse are part of a more general development that means that a previously common public sphere is becoming fragmented into several smaller communities that are isolated from each other.

One of the worst enemies of the oft-mentioned boundless and free "literary cross-pollination" (which is more potential than actual) continues to be the allergic (non-)reactions of a *broader* literary public sphere that is increasingly uninterested in anything foreign. The best remedy for such a critical asthma is the vigorous re-transnationalization of literary criticism.

¹ *Bonniers Litterära Magasin*, 8/1953, pp 563–566

² *Bonniers Litterära Magasin*, 10/1955, pp 771–774

³ Literary criticism is more than a source of information — but it is *also* a source of information.

⁴ *Kungliga bibliotekets nationalbibliografi* [The National Bibliography of the Swedish Royal Library], 2004

⁵ www.salongen.de