POETRY IN A GLOBAL AGE FROM A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE

Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry in a Global Age*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2020, 304 p.

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Jahan Ramazani's *Poetry in a Global Age* (2020) covers an important topic, making a number of substantial points and also opening up and highlighting some questions. One of the great contributions of the book is its call for the study of poetry within a model of world literature that respects the linguistic specificity not only of the poems that are bound to one language but also of those that employ translingual practices and cannot be adequately read against the background of a model of one or more national literatures (p. 238). The conception of the book, as the author himself reminds us repeatedly, does not aim at a systematic treatment of poetry in a global age, but rather outlines the space in which such an approach should be realized and shows some of its significant elements. Given the situation today, which is not only uncharted but also ever-changing, this book is an excellent entry into the subject.

With books such as the author's earlier volume *Poetry and Its Others* (2014) or Culler's *Theory of the Lyric* (2015), the reader is unlikely to question a certain assumption of conceptual universalism: in Culler, we readily accept the fact that he is concerned with lyric in general, even if his examples are only selective, and in Ramazani, we do not tend to problematize the large degree of portability in comparing poetry and other genres, even if the book does not address the question of the differences between national literatures. One might say that the poetic examples in these two books and in many others function almost as *pars pro toto*. In the case of *Poetry in a Global Age*, however, this is not so obvious, and the question arises as to what the limits of the synecdochic approach are, and whether synecdoche does not turn into metonymy when seen from another perspective. Or, to put it another way, whether examples and concepts with seemingly universal reach do not have a limited reach when seen from a different angle. If the concepts of the local and the global play a significant role in the book, what is their relationship to the universal when both imply heterogeneity? How do we work with universal or consensual concepts, without which thinking about poetry is meaningless, at a moment when their limits are revealed?

I will try to develop these issues more specifically here, starting from the distinction between metonymic and synecdochic perspectives. For a student at an American university, *Poetry in a Global Age* may be a book that gives a relatively comprehensive view on a relatively small sample. My perspective is informed by the fact that I come from a Central European country that belongs (or used to belong) to the so-called Second World, that is, a world that is and at the same time is not culturally affiliated

with the West,[1] at the same time it does not have a clear relationship with the Third World, and although it has experienced many historical turns, a lot of violence and injustice (and played different and not always positive roles in them), the colonial and postcolonial model does not describe this situation very well. While the importation and use of the postcolonial models open up significant and often neglected questions, they are also inaccurate and function more as cultural colonization than a clarifying concept.[2] Secondly, I teach poetry in a place where English, while functioning as a language of global communication and a primary scientific language, has not had a decisive cultural influence in earlier times, and a model of poetry built on English seems incomplete to say the least. In short, what may function as a *pars pro toto* in the cultural milieu in which the book was written, appears fragmentary from Central European perspective, like islands separated by empty spaces that raise questions the book does not always answer. At the same time, I am aware of the author's erudition and of the fact that he raises such questions in the "Introduction" and throughout the book and is conscious of the limits of their reasonable resolution (p. 22). All this makes my view partial. In this respect, my remarks are rather comments and additions to the margins of Ramazani's book.

In the introduction to his book, Jahan Ramazani first discusses the polyspatial and polytemporal nature of poetry, and he shows persuasively and in a concise way that poetry is fundamentally a genre that constantly borrows from other genres, it is influenced by them, shaped by them, and it mixes with them. These borrowings often, and especially in the cases on which the book focuses, do not respect language boundaries, which raises the question of the sufficiency of the concept of national literature as a basis for the study and reading of poetry. The second important part of the "Introduction" then addresses the question of the "dating" of the global age, showing that the global dimension of poetry, and of human activity and the world in general, is far from being a recent affair. This, however, raises a question that keeps coming up throughout the book. The ambiguity of the notion of a global age is evident, but the intense thematization of globality adds a new dimension; just as any salt solution is salty but crystallizes only at the moment of

1 This ambiguity is due, on the one hand, to the cultural affiliation to the West, but at the same time to the reserved attitude of Western countries towards the so-called Eastern Bloc. On this frustration see Krastev, Ivan — Holmes, Stephen. *The Light that Failed: Why the West is Losing the Fight for Democracy*. New York: Pegasus Books, 2019. Joseph Brodsky points out that writers from the Eastern Bloc came to the Western exile as if it were their home because they considered it the source of their cultural ideals. Brodsky is an example of a successful exile, but most of the other exile poets experienced disappointment because they remained on the margins — they were too close to the Western culture and therefore uninteresting. See Brodsky, Joseph. *On Grief and Reason*. London: Penguin Books, 2001, p. 21; see also Hrdlička, Josef. *Poetry in Exile: Czech Poets During the Cold War and the Western Poetic Tradition*. Prague: Karolinum Press, 2020, p. 326ff.

2 Alexander Kiossev uses the notion of self-colonizing for cultures "having succumbed to the cultural power of Europe and the West without having been invaded and turned into colonies in actual fact", see Kiossev, Alexander. "The Self-Colonizing Metaphor". [online]. [cit. 25. 9. 2023]. Accessible from http://monumenttotransformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html/s/self-colonization/the-self-colonizing-metaphor-alexander-kiossev.html.

saturation, which represents a qualitative break that makes saltiness visible. Globality has often been present in poetry as a theme and a structural feature, but it is only at a certain point in time that it becomes the subject of studies and books, and a factor that influences the reading of poems regardless of the intention of the author. Are poems global in our global age, or is it a change in the context and in the mode of reading that puts all poems in a global horizon? To varying degrees, it is both, but with some of the examples, a clearer distinction would be helpful. Can we say all poems are composed in the same way Latour's hammer or Read's pencil (the examples with which the book begins) are, or are there any whose heterogeneity is primarily due to the new context in which they inevitably find themselves? In the latter case, the pencil is hypothetically from one period and the paper from another, but one cannot do without the other.

The third part of the "Introduction" is concerned with terms (both in the sense of concepts and boundaries). I find the term "world anglophone", which Ramazani simply states, particularly irritating. My point is not, of course, to take issue with the choice and the concept — that is perfectly legitimate and understandable — but to consider how such a perspective affects the conception of the whole book. To what extent do we only jump from one island to another, and to what extent is it really the whole "globe" that forms the background of the reflections? While other languages play an important role in the final chapters, and the sections on Persian poetry in particular suggest a conceptual shift away from English, the scope of the whole book nevertheless rests on English as its foundation.

In the "Introduction", the composition of the book is characterized as "tranches" that contribute to the larger argument and subject (p. 22). This is, I think, well reflected in the focus of the chapters, which move from more general global topics (Chapter 1 to 3) of World War I, questions of locality and globality, and tourism, through two more theoretically oriented chapters on the relationship between modernism and postcolonialism and the migration of form, to three monographic chapters (Yeats, Stevens, Heaney) linking poets we would not label as primarily global, to a given global theme (modernism and Orientalism, ecological thought, and the image of the world as a globe). The last two chapters are devoted to code-switching, multilingualism in poetry, and translation in the broader context of the notion of world literature. The conclusion relates to current issues in lyric theory, hybridity and transnationality.

The book opens with a chapter on the Great War, which is often referred to as the first global conflict and has its place in the history of poetry thanks to the cosmopolitan poems that were written during the war. It is in this part of the book where I find the lack of at least a brief discussion of the context — not only literary, historical and geographical, but also thematic and conceptual — particularly unfortunate. Ramazani's focus on anglophone poetry is correct, but at the same time, it can be seen as a strangely distorting perspective. The First World War may have taken place on several continents, but the main battlefield was continental Europe (indeed, many of the examples cited are tied to it). The book is therefore often about poetry written by authors living abroad, while continental authors are mentioned only in passing, even though the poetry of this era certainly was cosmopolitan. This dislocation opens up several other connections, particularly to questions of place and tourism,

which are the subject of later chapters. Another important point is the artistic context: the poetry of the Great War was written during the period of avant-garde movements, major artistic groups and intense communication between artists across the continent (here too Britain and America stood rather apart). This connection is highlighted by Michael Hamburger in his still thought-provoking book *The Truth of Poetry* (1968) in a chapter entitled "Internationalism and War". However, the question of whether WWI as a global conflict is actually exceptional or not, especially in comparison to the Second World War and the wars of the 20th and 21st centuries, is directly thrust upon a reader. As Hamburger notes, the internationalism of 1912 was already a thing of the past on the eve of the Second World War,[3] and WWII prompted far less poetry than WWI. But it introduced the themes of the Holocaust, violence and evil into literature, which are in many ways transnational and shape our global age. At the same time, they are characterized by a great deal of historical and personal localization because they are based on a relationship to essentially non-transferable personal experience and testimony. In this, the internationalism of the first war is very different from what the second war provoked, and which is currently manifesting and reverberating much more strongly and also has a global character.

In 1990, Michel Serres published his book *Le contrat naturel*, in which he shows how wars, seemingly just human conflicts, also involve the environment and the place in which they take place and, as the scope of the conflict grow, threaten them, too. This may not have crystallized in the first war, but since Hiroshima at the latest (the toponym for a global event is characteristic here), even seemingly local war conflicts have had a global dimension and a profound effect on the non-human world. At this point, the subject of war, if we extend it beyond the First World War, is closely related to questions of ecopoetics. The first chapter of the book thus incorporates the topics of the later chapters and opens the book very well.

The place and locality, already implicitly present in the first chapter, are the subject of the next two chapters. I believe Stephanie Burt's distinction between *locus* and *region* would be helpful here.[4] The word "place" can refer to a particular relatively non-extended space (*locus*), or a larger area (*region*). The difference consists in the underlying phenomenology. One can spend one's entire life, or a large part of it, in one place in the latter sense: in a village, a small town, etc., while the first, limited place (*locus*) is in human mind necessarily associated with movement — one does not usually spend one's entire life in one location like a room, a house, a mountain, a vantage point, etc., unless it is an exceptional case. One always steps out of it or just passes through it. A *region* can represent something of a microcosm, while a *locus* almost necessarily leads to the joining of multiple places. Place as a *locus* is inevitably linked to movement, as Yves Bonnefoy perfectly expresses in his poem "Delphes du second jour": "Le pas dans son vrai lieu". The "vrai lieu" (a recurring motif in Bonnefoy's work) is a place where one wants to be, where one wants to arrive with a kind of idea or illusion of perfection, but from where one must also move away, which logically links the place to the topic of tourism and at the same time gives a deeper view of

3 Hamburger, Michael. *The Truth of Poetry*. London: Anvil Press Poetry, 1996, p. 154, 153.

4 Burt, Stephen (Stephanie). *From There: Some Thoughts on Poetry & Place*. Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2016, p. 38f.

tourism, both in the historical perspective of, for example, Goethe's *Italian Journey*, and more generally as one of the metaphors of human life.

A symptomatic example given by Ramazani is the *Poetry Atlas* website. As far as I can judge, it is partly based on Longfellow's giant anthology *Poems of Places* (1876–1879; 31 vols.). Its greatest distortion, according to Ramazani, is the uneven representation of poems from different regions, among which Europe and North America dominate. However, a second great distortion must be added because, regardless of region, English dominates among the languages, and *Poetry Atlas* belongs more fully to the following chapter on tourism in this regard. But above all, it shows how difficult it is to create a similar project that would be multifocal.

The fourth and especially the fifth chapter of the book are more theoretically oriented. In the first one of them, Ramazani tests modernism and postcolonialism on four models of their relationship to each other; in the second one, he critically analyses models based on the polarity of the centre and periphery. For these models of modernism vs. postcolonialism, it is, I think, worth considering whether they also include an internationalist avant-garde model of movements that, while often spreading from one place, develop on the basis of personal contacts, such as surrealism in the case of Aimé Césaire.

Using a number of examples, Jahan Ramazani shows that the model of the migration of form (based on the polarity of centre and periphery, which works with distant reading and which Moretti and other authors ground mainly in the novel) leading to the simplifying formula of foreign form / local content, is not very functional for the reading of poetry. As Ramazani writes, distant reading can well complement close reading (p. 162), which is the primary mode of reading poems. Ramazani develops this theme further in the chapter on "Yeats's Asias" and Orientalism. While I find the evidence quite persuasive and agree with the arguments, I cannot help feeling that these considerations are still determined by English as the primary language that defines the whole space of thinking. What Yeats, Eliot and, to some extent, Pound take in from other cultures has been at least partially conveyed to them through English (through translations and commentaries), while the authors from the colonized countries have direct access to anglophone poetry and, if they write in English, they enter a different level of communication than if they had stayed with their native languages. Would their poetry be global if it were not written in English? An examination of the communication between different languages (which is not limited to translation, but involves also reading in multiple languages and citing) would reveal a complex multilayered terrain, which cannot be easily translated into a centre-periphery relationship, even though it does contain central areas, margins, highways and dead ends, and the communication within it is often asymmetrical. In this space and at the present time, are all poems global, do they belong to a global context, or are some of them excluded from it? And wouldn't globality then be just a form of centrality?

Let me give an example. In 1929, Konstantin Biebl published a poetic composition called *New Icarus*. Biebl was a member of the Czech avant-garde, which later embraced surrealism. His composition was inspired by Apollinaire's poem "Zone", which, in the Czech environment, was perceived as a formal model with genre features. Biebl participated in the First World War, which he evokes in the poem, in-

cluding the motifs of internationalism. From the 1920s onwards, his poetry is full of exotic motifs, which made him no different from his avant-garde contemporaries, for many of whom, however, Paris was exotic enough. But he was the only one of these poets to travel to the Pacific, and a critique of colonialism pervades his work alongside the exoticisms. *New Icarus* combines all these motifs and is formally and thematically an exemplary global poem (including expressions from other languages and the image of the Earth as a sphere). Yet the poem can also be seen as entirely local since Biebl was translated hardly at all before the Second Worl War, and somewhat more after it, but not into English (at least not his *Ikarus* as a whole), and thus the poem practically did not exceed the boundaries of the language in which it was written.[5] Or does it become global with great delay when fragments of translation appear, when it is read alongside the authors Ramazani writes about, and when it is written about in English? In a way, globality is also a matter of negotiation, and Ramazani's scholar, who acts as a guide (p. 99), is not just a neutral mediator, but one who not only shows, but also promotes and shapes the paradigm of globality.

The absence of other languages is to some extent compensated for by the last two chapters, although English is the starting point for them as well. In the first one of these, Ramazani examines the so-called code-switching in poetry from various perspectives, recalling this phenomenon in everyday life and presenting arguments for and against code-switching in poetry, bearing in mind that poems are not mechanical imitations of ordinary language, but specific procedures. In 20th- and 21st-century poetry, language-switching has become quite common. Ramazani briefly pauses on the question of whether code-switching is beneficial to poetry and mentions critical attitudes towards it by other scholars. The fact is, however, that code/language-switching plays an increasingly important role in poetry, and the reader will encounter elements from other languages very frequently in poems today. A mapping of this phenomenon in its many manifestations could be the subject of a separate book. Jahan Ramazani gives a few examples that again introduce the problem well. If I may add one type of example, poems in which it is not clear which language forms the basis are interesting. The Czech poet Ivan Blatný wrote in exile in England for many years during the Cold War, much of which time was spent in mental institutions. In his poems, English, as well as German and French elements, appear against the background of Czech. Most scholars consider Czech as his primary language, into which words from elsewhere are introduced. But the reality is different — as time passes, English gains more importance in Blatný's work and one finds poems where English forms the basis. In the difficult-to-map whole of his poetry, we can perhaps speak of a spillover between languages, but it never stops at one point. Blatný's poems have been translated into English, but the question, which already points to the next chapter, is what the point of translation is in such a case, since the poems themselves are situated between languages and the translator would have to "float" as the author does, only in the opposite or different direction. In one short poem (named "Slavnost" [Festivity] in Czech) Blatný alternates three languages in six lines in the following

5 Quite extensive passages from *New Icarus* have only recently been published in English by Jan Mrázek in a book devoted to Biebl: *On This Modern Highway, Lost in the Jungle: Tropics, Travel, and Colonialism in Czech Poetry*. Prague: Karolinum Press, 2022.

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order: Eng / Cz / Ger / Cz / Cz / Eng.[6] Which language is the basic one? Czech perhaps because of the number of lines and the title, but the first and last lines are in English and form the framework of the poem. A single German line, which in turn occupies the central position, gives some guidance: "Der Dichter spricht in verschiedenen Sprachen". Perhaps the answer is that none of the languages is the main one.

An exceptional example of a multilingual poem is Valery Larbaud's "La neige" from 1934, written in nine or ten languages.[7] This poem, which is not just a wordplay, sees snow as a continuous layer covering Europe, but at the same time diversified locally and culturally, as languages and cultural backgrounds change along with the places (Latin also figures in the poem, representing not only a place, but also a culture). Larbaud translated the poem into French, quite rightly referring to this inadequate version as "Réduction au français".

This brings us to the last chapter on translation. The poems by Larbaud (he has several other multilingual poems connected with places besides "La neige") or by Blatný cannot be translated in the sense of seeking an equivalent in another language, because they make the boundaries between languages unclear. But "reductions" that make them accessible to readers in a specific language and help with their reading can be produced. Which opens up, I think, the key question of poetry "in a global age" — what role do readers play in it? Does it have readers? What kind of readers? To what extent does the writing of multilingual poems intersect with the experience of the readers, among whom poets also have their place? To what extent do the readers who also respond to and write about poems influence the production of such poems?

Ramazani concludes the book by discussing lyric poetry as a genre at the centre of the larger area of poetry, recalling the resurgence of lyric studies in recent years, particularly Jonathan Culler's seminal work, and developing his own points made in this context. It cannot be omitted that Ramazani's *Poetry in a Global Age* expands on his earlier work, especially *A Transnational Poetics* (2009). After this latest, inspiring book of his, it is clear that a solid study of poetry cannot remain within the framework of national literature, but neither can it rely on the familiar models of world literature that are primarily based on novels. That poetry needs to be read and studied across languages and with an awareness of its ability to take from other genres and not merge with them.

6 Blatný, Ivan. *The Drug of Art*. Transl. Matthew Sweney, Justin Quinn, Alex Zucker, Veronika Tuckerová and Anna Moschovakis. Brooklyn: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2007, p. 106.

7 See Clotilde Izzo Galluppi, "Voeux de Noël". *Revue d'Esthétique* 1979, no 1–2, p. 38–54. Izzo Galluppi lists nine languages, but I believe she omits one expression in Russian. Whatever the case, the difficulty of reading this poem is evidenced by the Édition Pléiade, where it contains a number of errors.