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Svend Erik Larsen

**LITERATURE AND  
THE EXPERIENCE OF  
GLOBALIZATION**

Texts Without Borders

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# Literature and the Experience of Globalization

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# Literature and the Experience of Globalization

Texts Without Borders

Svend Erik Larsen

Translated by John Irons

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*For Frederik, Maja, Sara, Freja and Emilie –  
globalists of tomorrow*

Oh the world's so big, so big,  
John, my little Johnnie,  
far more than you'll ever twig,  
John, my little Johnnie.

(from a Danish children's song)





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## Introduction: A Cultural Duck-Billed Platypus

How and why do we read literature in a globalized culture with a new and expanding media landscape? Globalization is a catchword with many meanings. Sometimes the word is used more to express our own enthusiastic or dismissive attitude towards a world in motion than to describe global realities, and at times, it simply floats off on the surface of an everyday fast-talking stream of speech. At the same time, however, 'globalization' is a clearly defined technical term within economics, politics and other domains. Globalization impinges on so many aspects of our life that the word cannot be restricted to particular specialist areas. Conceptually it is still open-ended, waiting to be made concrete and relevant to our everyday lives. It is this unfinished process in which literature actively participates, and to which this book is a contribution.

I hope that the book will convey the impression that literature is more profoundly involved in the globalized cultural processes than a mere supplier of literary images and counter-images of a globalized world's airports, documentation from developing countries and the social drama of protest movements. Of course, present-day literature bandies topical global themes around: rootless and marginalized people, journeys from place to place, financial dramas, terror activities, power of the media and religious conflicts. And, of course, many texts are openly critical of the power play of globalization, the breakdown of values, wars and poverty, and changes to human communities.

Yet, first of all, literature deals with the human experiences of globalization, more than with the obvious manifestations of the globalization. These experiences are felt everywhere, although in different ways. Otherwise, globalization would not be global, but only local or regional. Such experiences

concern the transformation of the basic building blocks of human culture and existence like our sense of place, body and movement in time and space, and the pressure to be able to translate languages and other cultural systems in a multifold network of cultural encounters as well the revision of the meaning of personal and collective memories. By confronting such issues with the immediate effects of globalization that are easily turned into thematic clusters, literature fills the themes with human life and strong emotions that we cannot do without if we want to become involved in them.

Moreover, literature contains more than just topical themes with an emotional appeal evoked by their existential impact. It also places the experience of globalization in a wider historical and cultural context than the functional contexts of contemporary economics and politics. Literature has always roamed across borders between cultures and languages in translations, linguistic influences, media, motifs, genres and symbols. It disrespectfully assumes that globalization has always existed. It behaves like a cultural duck-billed platypus, a border-crosser that does not occupy a neat place within the normal boundaries of our cultural and mental map. Such creatures have a rosy future ahead of them. The little platypus has outlived dinosaurs, sabre-toothed tigers and aurochs in the long history of our planet.<sup>1</sup>

The cross-border movements accelerated after Gutenberg started to print books in fifteenth-century Europe. Books could go everywhere, smuggled or openly disseminated, longer than the spoken words. For that reason, literature has always been on the scene wherever new cultural understandings and meanings are emerging, and where traditions are being opened up, also in today's manifold cultural transformations. It provides the cross-border global movements with certain meanings that the obvious themes alone do not supply, concentrating as they do on our immediate present age. Literature brings with it the long cultural tradition for cross-border activity into modern globalization, which thereby gains new meanings and a deeper historical perspective.

It would be naïve, though, to pretend that power and money are not involved in the relation between literature and globalization. With or without the inclination of the authors, literature is packaged in both; it is not merely the battleground of ideas and of new experiences. The institutions that lubricate the connection between works, society and the public are undergoing marked

changes: education systems, campaigns by ministers of culture, book fairs, private and public distribution networks, author support schemes, authors' rights, international awards and so on. We are talking about cultural power, considerable power. Nor should one forget that economic market conditions help determine what is written and read: the concentration of publishing firms, the relation of books to large media conglomerates, film rights, copyrights, TV programming and so on. We are talking about big money, really big money.

This book, however, does not intend to concern itself with such relations but to concentrate on the reading of literature. Centre stage is the physical pleasure at being surprised by the detail and the feeling of being spellbound when discovering the vista that opens up beyond known horizons. This is how literature expands the abstract circuit of globalization by giving it a historical dimension and turning it into a concrete, individual experience. In both the narrow, specialist conceptions of globalization and in the fashionable stream of speech, these two dimensions are normally lacking. But without them, we cannot relate to globalization as a concrete cultural process of which we ourselves are a part, and which we ourselves help to shape. Literature, with all its compelling effects, attempts to get us to understand the world in that perspective, cutting across its existing borders. Literature is independent, global thinking.

Thinking shapes a sense of totality, and so do texts. For that reason, I have sought to introduce only a few texts, some large, some small. At times, I also refer to fragments and extracts, but I hope I will succeed in making the reader want to read the works in their totality. Literature on globalization's terms cannot be boiled down to a few texts. But even if I had included ten times as many, it would have been only a glass of water in the Kalahari Desert. Rather one good work than ten quotations, twenty names and thirty titles.

The nine chapters of the book have been conceived as a cohesive sequence. Fortunately, though, readers are ungovernable and can choose to do whatever they like. For that reason, the individual chapters concentrate on one delimited subject, so that even those who like to jump around have something to land on. All foreign titles are quoted the first time they appear in the text; then I use the translated title and quote, if possible, from the English editions, which can be found in the bibliography. All non-English quotations have been translated

and all quotations from European languages have been checked with the original.

The reader who does not wish to use the references can simply read without being interrupted by heavy footnotes or references. Hence, those interested in proceeding further on their own will find in the notes to each chapter a brief reader's guide to references I have used and some supplementary information. If some readers wish to look over my shoulder, the bibliography also indicates the fictional and non-fictional works I have leaned my head on. If others feel this list is too long, bear in mind that it could have been lengthened from Tórshavn to Tasmania.

Teaching, lectures, chapters and articles have been the springboard for parts of the book. Before I hand the book on to its readers, I would like to thank all those who have listened, read and aired their views. More specifically, I would like to thank colleagues I have worked with within the Department of Comparative Literature at Aarhus University from 1998 to 2014. It has been a privilege beyond what I deserved. Also, I would like to thank my colleagues at the Centre for Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, Monash University, Melbourne, who have contributed with a roof over my head, a place to work in peace, a library and discussions during the writing of the Danish version of the book in spring 2007. My thanks also extend to my colleagues at the School of Literature and Journalism at Sichuan University during my service as Yangtze River Visiting Professor in 2016 when I revised it for this edition. This revision was made possible by the kind support of Aarhus University Research Foundation. And first of all, thanks to my translator, John Irons, whose rare gift for also translating poetry can be witnessed in Chapter 8, and to my friend Susan Bassnett for her comments.

The book is dedicated to my grandchildren, Frederik, Maja, Sara, Freja and Emilie. You have managed to get me to look, once more, at my world as if for the first time. You will grow up with globalization as a part of your everyday life, a time when maybe e-mails will be back in the past, the TV will belong to the Stone Age and the mobile phone will be something people tried to kid you into believing in. But books have been and will be there, always.

*Copenhagen and Chengdu, November 2016*

## Part One

# Globalization in a Literary Perspective





# The Breathing of Culture

## Texts without borders

In 1849, the nineteen-year-old Frederick Sinnett, of Anglo-German extraction, travelled from England to Australia to work as an engineer. During the seventeenth century and slightly beyond, the area was a battleground for French and British colonization – with the Dutch on the sidelines. It was rugged and unknown, best suited to the convicts the British deported there once they had thrown their Dutch and French competitors to the sharks. It was also impenetrable for the Europeans because of its climate and terrain, but less because of its indigenous people. They were simply not reckoned with, and certainly not as those to whom the country belonged. The savages did not understand such things. So the country did not belong to anyone and could simply as a *terra nullius* be declared to belong to those who shouted loudest in English, French or German, or shot farthest (Lindqvist 2007). The indigenous people, though, did not find the place any more strange, impassable or hazardous than indigenous peoples do in all other continents that they call home. Like the Europeans when at home, they had the deep-rooted conceptions of their places and their relationship to them expressed in myths, tales, laws and rules. These were just different from those of the Europeans. At that time, the major European powers, and later the United States, were only just discovering the continents that were to become the arena of modern globalization in all its cultural breadth.

Like other places colonized by the Europeans, most of the Australian whites lived in a belt along the coasts. Some farmed slightly further inland, others set themselves up as merchants, and yet others were former convicts, missionaries, adventurers and gold-diggers. Not what a European would call

civilization. The blacks were simply not taken into account. But, on the other hand, it was a place to be civilized, from a European point of view. From the outset, modern globalization has been both a geographical and a cultural process. The young Sinnett agreed with all this, but without the brutality that otherwise flourished. He stopped being an engineer in the geographical expansion of the European colony and became an enterprising journalist managing the issue of cultural expansion.

Sinnett was in no doubt that literature is a necessary and indispensable part of the process and not first to be introduced after elementary material protection of a rudimentary life has been established. It is already there as a part of this. Sinnett wrote in 1856 under the title 'The Fiction Fields of Australia':

MAN can no more do without works of fiction than he can do without clothing, and, indeed, not so well; for, where climate is propitious, and manners simple, people often manage to loiter down the road of life without any of the 'lendings' Lear cast away from him; yet, nevertheless, with nothing between the blue heaven and their polished skin, they will gather in a circle round some dusky orator or vocalist, as his imagination bodies forth the forms of things unknown, to the entertainment and elevation of his hearers. To amend our first proposition, then, works of fiction being more necessary, and universally disseminated, than clothing, they still resemble clothing in this, that they take different shapes and fashions in different ages. (Sinnett 1966: 21)

Sinnett would have understood the nine-year-old Digger, who almost 150 years later lives somewhere in the Australian outback that also belonged to Sinnett's surroundings. They are still found there, such places that make the back of the moon seem like home. Precisely there, the fundamental need of the narrative appears without any shadow. Digger features in one of the novels by the Lebanese-Australian David Malouf, *The Great World* (1990). He narrates quite literally for dear life, even though his mother gets rather annoyed when he sets his younger sister Jenny's imagination alight:

The moment he saw [his mother] he knew how angry she would be. But he couldn't help himself. Coming to the edge of some extraordinary possibility, he would let himself claim it, put it into words: if he didn't, the force of

it, huge and expanding in his head, might make him go flying off from the centre of himself. What he did now, shamefaced at being caught, was explode in giggles. (Malouf 1990: 30)

His mother is also finally placated in this way, and they all laugh together. Literature is not the wild fantasies and big words of a single individual. It is a concrete act when it is narrated and shared with an audience. It catches hold of us and can also catch hold of the situation and change it: Jenny's excitement, his mother's anger and Digger's urge to narrate end up as shared laughter. Literature is a cultural spinal cord that links places and cultures, an integral part of all cultures, where it shapes people and histories. Sinnett knows this, Digger does this. This book follows in their footsteps.

And there is a power behind the borderless words of literature. It is the strength of words that causes the works of writers to continue their way out into the world despite all national borders, and in doing so to shift the borders between the known and the unknown on the readers' inner map. The works decide the cultural agendas, even if the writers are imprisoned, go into voluntary or forced exile or are censured and killed. The holocaust victim Anne Frank was unable to get outside a door. But her diary could, and it continues to move around in the outside world. It occupies its acknowledged place in literature despite the narrow walls of her hiding place. The German Thomas Mann left Nazi Germany for the United States, but his works surpassed other writers on their German home pitch by several lengths and subsequently added a Nobel Prize to his early lead. The same applies to the Russian Alexander Solzhenitsyn, who wrote books that became both Russian and global major works.

An increasing number of such writers are appearing on the scene. They come from one place, live voluntarily or involuntarily in other places in the world and perhaps move on again, writers such as the Afghan Atiq Rahimi in Paris, the Iranian Azar Nafisi in Baltimore, the Chinese Xiaolu Guo in London or the Nigerian Chimamanda Adichie in New York. Their books get translated, become bestsellers and are perhaps turned into films, even though they do not gain a foothold in their native countries – as yet, and even though quite a few are less known to us – as yet. But it will not stay that way. Writers from the near and far East, from the former European colonies in

Africa and elsewhere and from such multicultural regions as the Caribbean are those who, in a globalized world, are already in the process of shifting the borders inside our heads and native countries in a global perspective, just as the European writers did when Europe was the world.

It was this European-dominated colonial world that Sinnett lived in prior to modern globalization. First and foremost, he wanted to show Europeans that the rough settlers balancing on the outer edge of the known world had literature that could be judged by the same yardstick as back home in Europe. Even though it was not possible to point to an Australian Shakespeare, the area belonged to what was then regarded as the European world culture. Sinnett's text, however, also shows his unconscious historical limitation. In his essay, he declined to take the mindset of the indigenous people into consideration, although he nevertheless had to refer to them in order to support his assertion of the global importance of literature. Even the naked Aborigines cannot help but listen to a black narrator, he concludes in the above quotation.

Today, literature does not only pass the border between mother country and colonies. In modern globalization, all the geographical and cultural borders are involved that come into contact with each other in the criss-cross movement of literature, but without any fixed cultural centre of gravity. The Russian-American Vladimir Nabokov wrote a global bestseller with *Lolita* in 1955. In an interview in *Playboy* in January 1964, he talks about how he himself has been in constant motion:

I am an American writer, born in Russia and educated in England where I studied French literature, before spending fifteen years in Germany. I came to America in 1940 and decided to become an American citizen, and make America my home ... I propelled myself out of Russia so vigorously, with such indignant force, that I have been rolling on and on ever since. (Nabokov 1973: 26, 27)

To the question as to why he always lives in furnished hotel suites, he replies that he does not want to get stuck in his own things and places.

Here things have clearly happened, 100 years after Sinnett made his reflections on the periphery of the Europeanized world. Nabokov too has admittedly a European linguistic and cultural background and makes use of it. Nobody can do anything else than make use of a personal background, no

matter where one comes from. Unlike Sinnett, however, he makes conscious choices. He chooses to become an American citizen, but also chooses a basic, unceasing movement out into the world. It is not rootlessness he is talking about, but about how at each place where he finds himself, he experiences the border between the local and the global as a border that is *his*. That is what he deals with, linguistically and culturally, in his works. The unskilled Sinnett and the sophisticated Nabokov lived with their separate backgrounds in different phases of the long cultural process of globalization. But it applies to both of them – and to this book – that literature is also involved in shaping the process, so that we can understand it as being *ours* wherever we happen to be.

### Culture in the garb of language

Even though Nabokov does not plague us with his private agonies, crossover authors and publishers pay and paid a price for their displacements. This also applied to Sinnett. He left Europe with the initial signs of tuberculosis, worked under severe conditions in his attempt as a journalist to create a cultural self-awareness in a country that was mainly a European convict colony, and died as early as 1860 before reaching forty. Writers do not, however, pay a greater price than all others who go beyond known borders. Others who try out their strength in a foreign country by going beyond cultural, linguistic and social borders in their education, work and entire life are not given anything for free either. As individuals, writers are no more interesting than other mould-breakers. They are all everyday globalists in a common cultural process. Writers are just better able to tell their story and use language that makes the stars fall out of the sky.

Nor does Nabokov tell us about his private life, but about the conditions that shaped him as a writer. When he says, 'I am living in Switzerland for purely private reasons,' it is not a piece of information but a discreet 'What business is it of yours?' (Nabokov 1973: 28). So there is good reason to keep focused on writers' texts rather than their personal fate. They can write so that other people's and their own experiences become larger than their individual lives and the individual horizons of their readers. This is not because literature is a special language. On the contrary, it is due to the fact that literature uses

the language we also use to order a beer, have a row, encourage our children, lie about money we owe or find words for our emotions and our world view. Language also actively interacts with all the other media we use for such purposes. And literature naturally does so as well. Novels are turned into films, and literature learns from films how it can refine its use of points of view and modes of narration.

Yet, media and activities such as images, gestures, sounds, games and sport cannot manage without language. Sport can be controlled by whistles and arm movements, but the rules for how the game is to be played must be written down in language. Even my silent body language requires language for me and others to make us aware that this is something *my* body is doing. Film, TV and digital images are full of language in what we see, but even more in what lies behind their coming into existence in shooting scripts, manuscripts, story boards and contracts.

The strongest linguistic medium, the book, will not be eradicated by other media. But its role alters in relation to the other media that are used in our culture. To include our open and uncertain experiences with globalization in our use of language means that we can articulate them in the medium that most subtly shapes our everyday life, its trivial doings, its highlights and our thoughts about how life is progressing. Culture uses the lungs of language to breathe.

Cultures, however, do not share a common language. No matter how universal the experiences and opinions are that languages get hold of, they are thereby also anchored in the place where this language functions. Images, sounds and gesture go beyond cultural borders without always paying attention to them. But when literature crosses over, we cannot avoid noticing in language the tension between local understanding and global perspective. We talk about the whole world, but use a local language to do so, and this world permeates our language, both its meanings and its vocabulary, in the form of technical words, other loan words and perfectly common expressions and idioms. France has an overt policy of whitewashing smuggled goods from other languages – but it cannot prevent the cross-border practice of language. Languages that are used are never pure, nor is the literature that makes use of them. A love affair between language and literature as something purely national is an unconsummated love relationship that has nothing to

do with the real life that language and literature lead. This life is profoundly promiscuous.

That is why translations are an important part of literary activity, particularly in a globalized context. Via translation, we not only transfer utterances and forms of utterances more or less correctly from one language to another. It challenges and develops our very ability to express ourselves in all the languages that are involved in the translation, our own language included, and thereby expands their cultural register on their home ground. Bible translations in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries meant more for a crossover expansion of the capacity of the European languages as written and cultural languages than the internal developments of the individual languages. The Greek and Latin biblical texts that the translators made use of are themselves translations. Languages develop because they are used to speak of a world that is larger than those who use them, and languages cannot avoid intermeshing when they meet in situations that cut across the limitations of the language users. The border between the local and the global passes straight through the middle of language, and we express this border every time we speak.

That is why languages also have open borders and are constantly shifting them. Mixed languages result that later may acquire the status of national languages, and these languages will in turn gradually be sucked up by others. That is how Pidgin, Creole and Yiddish work together with today's language of many migrant groups around the world. They are shaped as sub-languages as a mixture of several languages that have not been completely mastered, but the mixtures work in practice. Since the languages help create necessary relations between shifting populations in a particular location, they eventually rub off on each other and on the main language of that location to the effect that both the jargon and the main language mutate. A common language emerges that can be spoken at many levels. That is how Afrikaans came into being in South Africa and Swahili spread in a belt across Central Africa. In the Mediterranean area, in the Middle Ages, a cocktail was used of early Italian that was close to Latin, mixed with Greek, Turkish and Arabic, which became a practical common language for trading and communication at a supra-regional level and also by those countries that took part in the crusades. This hotchpotch was referred to as a *lingua franca*, a term that is still in use today.

So those who believe that English is the main language of globalization are wrong. Firstly, English is already many different types of English today. Just look at the spelling check programme on the computer: British, American, Australian and a number of other variants. Secondly, these stable variants are in a minority. The global English that can successfully be used to improvise at meeting places of globalization are varieties of broken English, a *lingua franca* that is just as much a hotchpotch as that of the Middle Ages. That is the language all of us master, if this is the correct verb, but it can very easily seem confusing when ten or so various forms of broken English are being spoken at one and the same time. But then, we improvise, and as a rule do so successfully without any central reference to standard English grammar. The former director of IBM, Jean-Paul Nerrière, has dubbed this practical language of communication *globish*. He drily notes that it functions everywhere, but that peoples with one of the main types of English as their native language are at a handicap (Nerrière 2005).

It is this broad linguistic and cultural palette that literature operates with when using language. The inner strength of language has always been that understanding is more important than formal correctness, even though linguistic purists often claim the opposite. This strength is the linguistic springboard of literature. Literature is not global because it takes place in airports or some far-distant country, nor because it deals with international terror networks or voyages in the Pacific. Such literature only comprises what we could call *global literature*, a recent literary subgenre just like Victorian literature, high modernism, magical realism from South America or Southern literature from the United States. It is a particular group of texts with a certain thematic and perhaps a formal affiliation that is located in a demarcated historical period close to our own age. Global literature is both exciting and relevant and will appear in this book. But it is not the concern of this book. This book does not deal with how we read a particular type of literature, but with how we can use literature from various times and places to relate actively to the global and rift-filled cultural processes we find ourselves in. The focus is not on a textual theme but on reader involvement and a wider historical perspective.

In the age of globalization, all locations are close areas for some people and at the same time distant areas for others. All locations display their own



special traces of the same globalization process, and all locations can be the starting point for understanding this process. When literature uses language, it is not some external medium that is polished with rhyme, rhythm and exciting actions and characters. Instead, it makes us aware that the meeting between the local and that which lies further away from the tips of our noses takes place most subtly in language and with language. Literature operates as a jack-of-all-trades in the global cultural workshop of language.

So literature is only apparently distinct from normal language. It uses imagery and invents strange characters and irrational occurrences; it alters set patterns for time and space – indeed, it almost goes beyond everything we can confirm in the physical world. It ‘bodies forth the form of things unknown’, as Sinnett has just said. However, literature does not make use of other linguistic characteristics than those which language already has in store, when we fantasize about unattainable holidays and lottery wins. But it has a greater self-awareness about what it does with language than we have in our everyday lives. And it shows this directly in its material delight in language. In literature, linguistic self-awareness steps into the foreground so that language can acquire a central cultural function: to transcend the boundaries of what we expect, but in such a way that we notice that this is taking place with the same language that we use when organizing the world we know.

This self-conscious use of language is the aesthetic side of literature. People often associate aesthetics with glossy wrapping paper that has nothing to do with the contents inside. But all practical work must concentrate on its material to have an effect. A mechanic has to master his tools and know the durability and suitability of his materials. A bicycle repairer must know how a saddle is imprinted by the rear end that is placed on it. Concentration on and also delight in the material do not take us away from the matter in hand but straight to it, also in literature.

If this sounds abstract, just consider how rhyme and wordplay immediately catch a child’s attention and cause it next time to fetch a particular book among all its toys just to enjoy again and again the magic of the sound and sight of words. Aesthetics is what makes a text something concrete that we can sense and feel: the sound, the feel of a book, its layout, the rhythm of the book that is repeated in our body, something particular that we can tell others about and return to ourselves. Without aesthetic effects, a text would merely be one of

the cardboard cut-outs that look like books on the furniture dealer's showcase shelves.

A rapper without aesthetic self-awareness – forget it! He improvises freestyle with a maelstrom of rhyme, rhythm and wordplay on a theme that otherwise would not interest us for the 60 seconds it takes. It is concrete and effective language work with a top-tuned aesthetic self-awareness during an MC Fight Night that would have got Shakespeare to incorporate it into his plays on the spot. The opening of *Romeo and Juliet* (1594) is actually already pure battle rap. Shakespeare was a match for rappers when it came to wordplay and rhyme about sex, the body, men and women of both sexes and ethnic coarseness.<sup>1</sup>

That aesthetics should be some kind of red herring that art in particular is good at is a recent conception of aesthetics. The original meaning is concrete and does not particularly apply to art. The Greek word *aisthesis* means, quite simply, sensory experience, as opposed to abstract thought, *noesis*. Greek words ending in *-is* normally refer to an activity. So the aesthetic deals with everything to do with the objects around us, natural objects or those that are man-made, of which we process our experience with our senses. Art came to play a special role among the objects we produce ourselves. The hidden forms and principles that govern nature were revealed to our senses in art. The Greek statues, which have been imitated down through the history of European culture, did therefore not depict particular bodies to the Greeks. They made the ideal forms of the body visible and perceptible to us, so that each of us could nevertheless gain a concrete experience of the hidden dimensions via our senses and experiential antennae. It was only later that art came to be regarded as the most important, and for some even the only aesthetic medium and was no longer considered to be merely a particular instance of concrete, individual sensory experience.

I intend to retain the original meaning of the word aesthetics. When literature operates consciously with its aesthetic effects, there is only one intention, which is not an escape from reality. On the contrary, the relations that are otherwise abstract or inaccessible are made concrete, accessible and relevant to the individual reader. Aesthetics is bridge-building between these two dimensions of our experience and is therefore a central cultural function of literature. Aesthetic self-awareness is what gets the text to look the

individual reader straight in the eye: 'Hey you, sitting there reading right now – you're the one I'm talking to'. The Polish-English writer of the seven seas, Joseph Conrad, expresses this in his manifesto-like preface to *The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'* (1897):

All art ... appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. (Conrad 1950: ix)

It is these springs Digger is scooping up from when his mother becomes angry, Jenny excited, he himself exalted and all of them end up giggling.

Later, Digger also describes reading in that light. As an adult he becomes a slave labourer as a Japanese POW in Malaysia during the Asia-Pacific War until 1945. His comrade Mac is also interested in reading, and when he is beaten to death, Digger gets his letters from Iris back home. He knows them by heart:

The letters were just a few hundred words. But the words themselves were only part of it. / Reading took time. That was the important thing. Constant folding and refolding had split the pages, and in the continuous damp up here the ink had run and was hard to read. Each time he took them out, especially if his hands were shaking and wet, he ran the risk of damaging them. But he liked the look of the unfolded pages, their weight – very light they were – on his palm. Even the stains were important. So was the colour of the ink, which differed from letter to letter, even from page to page of the same letter, so that you could see, or guess, where Iris had put the pen down in mid-sentence to go off and do something. So what you were reading was not just words. (Malouf 1990: 145)

It is the concrete experience with all his senses that grips him when reading, both when Iris imagines a larger world to herself somewhere else, and when he feels the writing paper. It is Iris' sensory experience, here and now every time Digger reads the letters, which opens up a larger world beyond the words. That is also how it is when we hear the words, feel the book, see the sentences in black on white. The reading is both a repetition and a unique experience. It does not need cola and popcorn with it as in the cinema or in front of the TV, where we do not have a direct sensory experience of a screen. Literature

is therefore not a cultural phenomenon with more or less aesthetic glitter that we can ignore, so that we can enjoy the usual meaning of the words and their deeper significance. No, literature is a cultural phenomenon *because* it is an aesthetic phenomenon, for it is in that way that it sets in motion the individual reader's sensory experience of text and world.

The medium of literature in that process is language, a medium we all share. For that reason, literature is also part of a culture's shared resources, even though not everyone reads it and not everyone has an equally large vocabulary or command of language. The same applies to films. Although not everyone goes to the cinema or watches DVDs, films strongly influence our shared visual outside world in ads and commercials, fashion and the organization of the cityscape. Literature also profoundly influences the language everyone uses, readers of literature or not, when its effects continue to circulate outside literature. Expressions, images, sayings, ideas, realizations that are part of our everyday language, without our always thinking about it, have grown on the wide-ranging continents of literature. When literature broadens the world, it is not just some world or other or somebody's world that this applies to, but *our* world. If language is culture's lungs, literature is the deep breathing that maintains the supply of oxygen.

This book talks about why and how we can read literature with globalization as a perspective, also literature which belongs to the past but which is the precondition for how we understand this perspective. The basic view of the book is that literature is not first and foremost a collection of texts with global literature as one group, but is an active linguistic and cultural function with aesthetic effects. We can only understand its importance today by looking at it in relation to our globalized cultural conditions, and in relation to other forms and histories of expression and media that also cause our concrete experiences with these conditions to cut across the world we are familiar with.

### 'Seeing things for the first time'

If some people feel that they are going to read yet another introduction to how one reads literature, they are absolutely right, but with a new condition, and thus different from other introductions. The explosive opening up of the

world's borders in recent years has created new crossover vistas and made regional life global, as, for example, triggered by migration, climate changes, nature conservation, energy supply and religious conceptions. But new barriers have also been put in place where regionalization has strengthened local self-awareness. In a broad sense, new cultural themes and challenges have been created, and thereby new frameworks for the way literature can influence things. That situation calls for new introductions, also others besides mine.

When the borders of culture shift, it not only leaves a mark on the new literature. Even though the texts already standing on the shelves are unchanged, their meaning to us changes, because we have different cultural horizons when we read them and because their aesthetic effect is new every time it hits us, also when new media emerge next to the book. Globalization is not without a history, even though it punctures the speech bubbles of known local history about life as celebrated in a variety of open air museum villages around the world. But it encourages us to look for other and older texts and prerequisites than those that normally lie at the top of the pile on the book seller's desk. Works we have previously failed to notice, and others that we have read with different eyes, have also helped to build the open cultural platform where we now hesitantly stand. Globalization was already under way before we saw it clearly enough to be able to give it a name (Osterhammel and Petersson 2009). Among the texts and the material that cultural history has already laid around today's cultural platform, globalization also invites us to reconsider our choice of texts and interpretations from the past so we can use them again to make banisters and railings helping us to keep our balance in the situation where we are now.

For that reason, we are to read not only the new literature but also existing literature anew. In the former European colonies, including the United States, it has in particular been the indigenous literary tradition that came to the fore, from both before and after colonization. This rediscovery has given their history greater cohesion for the present inhabitants with mixed colonial roots. Part and parcel of this process is an often painful awareness of the fact that the colonies belonged to those originally living there, before the colonial powers copiously helped themselves from the vast buffet of raw materials and cultural products that was laid out. Via difficult negotiations and court cases, some of the indigenous peoples are now getting some of their rights recognized

and are having some of their lands reapportioned to them, occasionally accompanied by apologies. The past cannot be re-established, but in this way history can be rewritten and put into practice today on global conditions by keeping history alive on new conditions. This is not an unqualified success, but without the age-old narratives and other forms of artistic expression that have kept the blacked-out tradition alive, nothing at all would have happened. The traditional texts have also now come alive by crossing cultural borders and conceptual barriers, even though the literary history that has screened them mainly did so with the aim of enclosing them as exotica in national and other local arenas. An introduction that does not encourage people both to understand contemporary literature and to restructure traditional texts and concepts is not an introduction to literature on the conditions of globalization.<sup>2</sup>

On the occasion of Mozart's 250th birthday in 2006, Slavoj Žižek pointed out the necessary risk we run when we look at tradition with new eyes. We risk losing it. In this case, he refers to a new performance of *Così fan tutte*, which is a radical intervention in the performative tradition of the opera:

Each ... intervention is a risky act and must be judged by its own immanent standards. Only one thing is sure: the only way to be faithful to a classic work is to take such a risk – avoiding it, sticking to the traditional letter, is the safest way to betray the spirit of the classic. (Žižek 2007: s.p.)

This risk also applies to literature. In 1958 the Australian Nobel Prize winner Patrick White describes the process in his essay 'The Prodigal Son': 'Writing, which had meant the practice of an art by a polished mind in civilised surroundings, became a struggle to create completely fresh forms out of the rocks and sticks of words. I began to see things for the first time' (White 1989: 16). Literature can get us to look at things we know and traditions we are familiar with as if we were seeing them for the first time.<sup>3</sup> It is our chance to make it *ours* again in a new way, and to see the known as something else that for the first time can be formulated in *our* language. Globalization forces us to do so today and literature actually does it with us.

Tradition is the way a present time acquires a historical perspective, also the present time of globalization. However, this book does not contain a cohesive description of the history of culture, literature or ideas up to the present day. Globalization is neither the provisional final station of the long, straight road

of history nor certain economic operations here and now without a history. It is a reason to reinterpret parts of history, so that it becomes a resource for us today. I therefore make use of texts that have been read before, and concepts that have been used before, but give them other perspectives. And therefore I present historical contexts in relation to concrete texts and issues, not as accounts of clear historical trajectories, but opening general perspectives of literary relevance from concrete events. But along the book, these contexts will gradually cover large sections of European cultural history, selected, re-used and also used for new interpretations.

The book does not deal with what metaphors, narrators or genres are. Nor are there any model readings from the top icing layer of the cream cake down through layer upon layer until we reach the deeper meanings at the bottom of the macaroon. All readings are selective and focused on the experience of globalization. Nor do I conduct a comprehensive discussion of earlier schools of literary criticism. I assume that work has already been done by many readers and can be accessed on book shelves.

There are also topically prevalent points of view regarding literature that one will search for in vain in this book. The relation to national histories of literature and national literary canons is mainly indirectly present, even though many people in recent years spend a lot of time and effort with canon formation. That works of art, particularly linguistic ones, are traditionally conceived on the initial basis of their national affiliation, possibly with a few words about international dissemination or influence, is contrary to the very nature of literature. Literature has always been a model for global thinking that makes the constitutive exchange between local experience and the world outside concrete. Under fluctuating historical conditions, this model has been given a different content, but it has always functioned in such a way that we can use this form of thinking on new conditions.

The national expression is only a knot that for a short while binds together all the cross-cultural threads that are the real life-lines of literature. The most important purpose of national literary history in a globalized world ought to be to show how the local literature opens up, and has always done so, towards a world outside, an opening that allows any local area to come into existence at all. It was not the world outside Verona that killed Romeo and Juliet but Verona's monumental inwardness. Literature nurtures our capacity to avoid

paying what Amitav Ghosh in *The Glass Palace* (2000) refers to as 'the price of a monumental inwardness' (Ghosh 2000: 349).

Nor is there much to be found in my book for those who are interested in portraits of the world's great writers and their biographies. This field is studied by many people at present and gives rise to many exciting initiatives in the grey zone between fiction and reality and between the writer as a creator and as a social individual. This book prioritizes texts, and every writer is regarded as William Shakespeare. We fortunately know very little about him, while at the same time his texts go straight for the jugular. He writes texts that with their forms, motifs and ideas are involved in the broad cultural contexts outside the texts, and that take their readers with them on their journey.

## World literature

Those who want to get an answer to the question of what the perfectly globalized work of fiction looks like, will be disappointed. In recent years, the world literature paradigm has framed a difficult discussion of value in a globalized framework.<sup>4</sup> Yet, world literature does not indicate quality but function. World literature comprises all forms of literature that actually exist and are used in a way that creates new connections between historical periods, between texts and genres and between local and cross-border phenomena. No literature *is* just world literature, but all literature in all local languages *can become* it by the way we use it and through the interpretations of the world it invites, when we as readers accept that invitation. This occurs when literature transcends cultural boundaries determined by place and time: literature is always locally anchored and yet crosses borders at the same time. Texts do not become world literature by being incorporated into a canon of world literature but by shifting the border markers of the languages in which they are written. All texts do this, but some texts do it better than others. Ibsen is not more theatre than a school play, but better theatre. The good works are not more world literature than the others either. They are simply better at being it. It is such texts that I have chosen in this book.

There are of course perfect works of art that break through the boundaries of space and time. We are unable to forget them. They strike us dumb with



admiration, possibly almost fear. They are new each and every time we meet them when our knowledge, attitudes and total life-experience and cultural surroundings are undergoing change. Some of us would be hard put to live without them, but it is certain that we would be unable to live if we solely wanted to live next door to perfection.

Perfection does not automatically make them world literature. It does not say anything about the participation of literature and language in cultural processes. It is wonderful to stumble across such a work as an exception, but in literature – as in the rest of existence – it is unusable as a set norm for practice. Many authors who we could not do without would fail abjectly. There is excess fat in works by Honoré de Balzac, at times a need for a gang of clearers in Charles Dickens, spot cleaning needs to be done in Homer and Dante, and in Leo Tolstoy there are places rather like trousers that need to be taken up before their bottoms fray too much. All of them stand in the midst of a cultural process they have no overview of, and they take us with them into it. It is its confusing lack of clarity they write about, not its clarification and no perfection. Hence the awe that strikes us.

Globalization confronts literature and readers with new challenges that are determined neither by the literature nor by the readers themselves. These challenges arise in the encounter between the requirements and needs that a globalized cultural arena under development has and the resources offered by literature and language. In this encounter, new cultural conditions can draw on forgotten or unknown resources in literature and tradition, and with these resources literature can in turn enable *us* to better formulate the cultural processes of globalization, because without us, wherever we happen to be, they do not take place at all.

Some people would have us believe that the local and the global are totally interactive, so that now all of us are *glocal*. This linguistic neologism is smarter than it is wise, and it only makes one more appearance in this book. The term casts a veil over the fact that the relation between the local and the global is a process full of breaks, interruptions and unsolved conflicts evolving when borders are moving in yet unknown directions. It calls for circumspection and insight to make a cohesive interconnection out of this process. Literature is not a question of a seamless glocal interconnection, but of this open process. Literature is a form of expression at our disposal for investing human

experience in the broader processes of globalization that determines our local lives.

In that situation, there are two basic attitudes to reading. Harold Bloom asks, as do I: How and why are we to read literature? But in his preface to the book *How to Read and Why?* (2000) he answers differently. The reader is a lone wolf whose concentration on himself or herself is increased through reading. Gradually, the reader is raised above time and space in order to strengthen a sense of selfhood under the aspect of eternity. Reading runs parallel to personal life. Maturity and the perfect reading only come ultimately. I was on the point of saying: when it is too late. There is here a silent assumption that various stages of life and experiences can be assessed in relation to the same yardstick for maturity and its coincidence with the old-age pension. But if I behave like an OAP at the age of twenty five, I am overmature. And if I play at being young with young people when I am seventy years old, I am immature. With or without literature there is no ideal maturity as a normative common denominator.

This book represents a different point of view: Bloom is of course right in saying that both literary works and readers are unique phenomena that can roam through space and time, literature in its meanings and we in our imagination. However, like the reader, literature is always anchored outside itself, is historical. To look oneself ever more deeply in the eye without gaining a greater glimpse of the world outside is a higher form of blindness. The subject of the next chapter is globalization, not as an abstract process but as a concretely experienced cultural process and thus a challenge to literature and its readers.