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The Historical and Political Re/turn in American Literary Studies in an East European Context

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In recent years the question of cultural values has been most crucially enacted not within the field of individual cultures, but across and between cultures. Transcultural communication has become a central issue in the present movement towards a world culture, labelled by theorists as " the global post-modern", one of "hybridization" and "creolization"[1]. In what follows I will try to trace the influence of the latest tendencies in American cultural and literary studies on the current cultural processes in Eastern Europe, more particularly in Bulgaria. I have to say at the very beginning that I'm aware of the complexity of the problematic term "Eastern Europe," which is not simply a geographic term. For some, it is an euphemism for "the backyard of Europe," for others it signals an opposition of the sort "Western Europe/the man" versus "Eastern Europe/ the woman," while for still others it simply refers to a now empty referent, "Eastern Bloc." Yet despite the numerous differences among the countries and cultures of Eastern Europe there are certain features they have in common. It looks like the whole of Eastern Europe is entering a kind of postmodern cultural situation now - there are no borders to transcend, no norms, values, genres to destroy or subvert; figuratively speaking there are no specific directions, no up and down, no left and right. Now all of a sudden, anything can be said, written, done; in this total chaos and vacuum of values we have a bit of everything - a bit of art, a bit of pornography, a bit of Dalai Lama, a bit of the West, a bit of Europe, a bit of national pride, a bit of melancholy. In many ways this transitional period is a movement from uniformity to difference - in all its dimensions: political, ideological, national, cultural, as well as in matters of class, ethnicity, gender and this new process of explosion of difference is very much related to the current global postmodern process of proliferation and the marketing of difference.

In an article dealing with the issues of the local and the global, the British cultural theorist Stuart Hall asks a crucial question, "What would be an identity that is constructed through things which are different rather than things which are the same?"(39) He views the current globalization process as a global formation working on the terrain of post-modern culture, which is an extremely contradictory space. For him, this "global post-modern" is a peculiar homogenizing form of global mass culture and cultural representation , enormously absorptive of things, which recognizes and absorbs differences within a larger overarching framework of what is essentially an American conception of the world, no longer European or English in nature. The new post-Fordist forms of global economic and cultural power cannot continue their global expansion without learning to live with, and work through, difference; their paradoxical nature of being both multi-national and de-centered demands proliferation of difference and operation through difference. "In order to maintain its global position," Hall argues, "capital has to negotiate, incorporate and partly reflect the differences it was trying to overcome. It had to try to get hold of, and neutralize, to some degree, the differences. It is trying to constitute a world in which things are different. And that is the pleasure of it but differences do not matter."(32-33)

I will consider the issue of 'cultural difference' in America from two perspectives: first, within the American context and then - outside it, from an East European perspective. During the last decades of 'cultural separatism' in America the differences along the lines of ethnicity, class, region and gender have not diminished, have not been absorbed - on the contrary, they have been emphasized and they still co-exist relatively independently, without trying to converge in a universal pattern. Instead of still believing in a future utopia of a unified humanity, American culture has given up its historical dream of "E Pluribus Unum," declared as early as 1782 on the Great Seal of the United States. Now the question is rather

"How far can we go with difference?" Within higher education polarization has occurred between practical criticism and theory, gender studies and the traditional male dominated canon, popular culture and high culture. Recent debates on what to teach and how to teach it reflect the need for new forms suitable for expressing the current transcultural realities of the U.S., the need to explore the cultural ramifications of the new intercultural realities of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Native-Americans and Chicanos and Latinos. *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (published in 1990) can be used as a measuring rod for the latest developments in American cultural and literary studies and the various reactions to them. From the book's start, with ancient Native American creation myths, through separate chapters on the Harlem Renaissance and the social protest literature of the 1930s, to its end 5,500 pages later with modern Chicano poets, the so called "mammoth/ controversial/ revolutionary"[2] *Heath Anthology* expands radically the canon of American literature with an unprecedented amount of writings by women and minorities. (The anthology includes material by 109 women of all races.) In such a way the anthology emphasizes diversity of cultures, historical contexts and literary trends rather than focusing primarily on a few prominent authors. The goals of the radical teachers on the editorial board has been "to represent the range of the cultures of America, cultures in the plural," "to offer opportunities for drawing stimulating comparisons and contrasts between canonical and non-canonical figures, between female and male, between one ethnic writer and another."[3] The editors are convinced that the process of studying and comparing "such differing works will enlarge our understanding of - even help us fundamentally redefine - the literature that has in fact been produced in the United States."4 *The Heath Anthology*, representing the story of American literature as one of dis-unity, de-centering, dispersal, and splintering, has often been counterpoised to the dominant *Norton Anthology,* viewing American literature as a unified tradition, a harmonious representation of the classics and the established canon. Although the debate on canon revision a propos of the *Heath*

Anthology has been extremely heated and many conservatives have expressed fears that "the change would erode the values of Western culture", that "many selections have been chosen for their political rather than literary merits," the brand new Fourth edition of the *Norton Anthology* (published in 1994) comes to show only that this hybridization of cultures and multiplicity of canons is already an acknowledged fact. The Fourth Edition of the *Norton Anthology* also introduces two major innovations - literature to 1620 as literature of encounter, a greatly increased attention to Native American oral and written traditions plus strengthening the offererings by a number of women writers. Thus, the "new trinity," metaphorically speaking, - the race, class and gender aspects of the multi-faceted contemporary American society - have finally taken their legitimate place in the field of American cultural and literary studies.

How is this aesthetics of difference in American cultural/literary studies rendered in teaching and representing American literature out of its original context, more particularly in the current transitional period in Bulgaria? I will comment mainly on American literature because until recently American classical literature has been the sole exponent of American culture, while the pop-culture products (music, videofilms, films, advertising, best-sellers, clothes, etc.) have flooded the country only recently. Outside the American context, the situation changes - American literature and America are filtered through the receiving home culture and through a certain set of culturally constructed stereotypes, mainly accentuated by the images of America provided by the mass media. During the last five years American culture has been accorded an extremely warm reception in Bulgaria, but it has been mainly represented by the decibels of the Voice of America and by the processes of mass Coca-Cola-ization ,Marlboro-ization, and Walt Disney-ization of the whole of Eastern Europe. The Bulgarian stance on the American omni-culture pertains to much of the mixed twofold European attitude to America established ever since the classical European mind invented the idea of

America - the latter has always been suspended between two extreme positions: the ideal and the real, utopia and anti-utopia. Nowadays when referring to the strong American cultural presence most, Bulgarians use the term "penetration", probably quite unware of the pronounced sexual implication in it. Yet, consciously or not, the phrase "American penetration" speaks of a kind of erotic conquest, certain forcefulness and despoiling of native cultural virginity and purity, together with sexual play and aggression. Perhaps this analogy between masculine and cultural imperialism wouldn't seem accidental if we take into consideration Jean Baudrillard's order of seduction strategies with its ritual, aesthetic and political phases. We have already gone through what he calls "the ritual phrase" of seduction, now we are entering the "aesthetic phase" - "the one approaching that of the feminine and of sexuality, of the ironic and the diabolic," that has taken on the obvious meaning of diversion, gaming and appearances"(1988: 164). The political phase has not materialized yet although covertly cultural practices do the job of politics in a much more sophisticated and intricate way.

In Baudrillard's words modern people "live in non-sense" and we can't help the challenge of "seduction as destiny." It might be a deception, an illusion but the lure is always there. In his book "America" the French theorist suggests that America is the best possible illustration of that idea - it is all image, or even the image of the image, twice removed from reality. As against the melancholy of European analyses Baudrillard reflects on the last great myth of our modernity - the cult of stars: (...) "They say that stars give you something to dream about, but there is a difference between dreaming and fascination by images. The screen idols are immanent in the unfolding of life as a series of images. They are a system of luxury prefabrication, a brilliant synthesis of the stereotypes of life and love. They embody one single passion only : the passion for images, and the immanence of desire in the image"(1986:56).

In a similar way, in the Bulgarian scene, America is being reduced to a huge "trompe-l'oeil," a picture/image, offering at distance the illusion of a better reality. This new American presence has a strong cinemagraphic quality since it is mainly through the silver and the TV screen that it produces its special effects - it is like a non-stop running TV ad of euphoric and erotic images which can hardly be resisted. "Pepsi - the choice of a new generation," "It's a whole new world," "Always Coca-Cola," "It's beautiful because it's new," and so on. If we try to decipher these imperative "stereotypes of life and love" in terms of the American values, the legacy is easy to see: new over used, now over then, tomorrow over today, here over there, young over old - a total reversal of the traditional Bulgarian value system. To put it in a nutshell, the two national narratives are totally opposite: the American is a teleological one, the Bulgarian - a retrospective one. Historically, the American choice has been to transcend one's roots, fate, history, and ancestors in order to become something new: a new identity for a new place in a new world. Nowadays most Bulgarians seem to be fascinated by this American model of transcending the past, transcending one's origin and limitations and they are willing to leave behind the cumbersome roots, past and memories - mostly tragic and painful for thirteen centuries on end. What is at stake in a similar write-off procedure and automatic transcultural transplantation of the American aesthetics of newness and difference?

If we analyse the reception of American literature and culture through what has been translated, taught, represented and appreciated, first diachronically (in the course of history) and then synchronically (within contemporary Bulgarian society and its structure) we can trace certain paradoxes. For example, in many respects the latest developments and revisions in American literary and cultural studies, including the return of history and politics into literary studies, are not that new and disruptive for our canon of American literature - we seem to have always had a different "socialist canon," very much related to the "non-national Sovietised

canon of the Eastern Bloc." As far as the class and race issues are concerned, they have always been central in teaching and representing American literature. Having been brought up in the tradition of "socialist realism" and "critical realism" only (i.e. realism as truthfulness and objective reflection of reality, never seen as illusionism as in Roland Barthes' terms), Bulgarian readers/students have been familiar with American abolitionist literature, with critical realists such as William Dean Howells, Hamlin Garland, Mark Twain, Frank Norris, Jack London, Theodor Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, with the social protest novels by John Steinbeck, Erskine Caldwell, Albert Maltz, Philip Bonosky, the plays by Lillian Hellman and Clifford Odets. Ethnic American literature has also been widely published, read and taught - mainly Black American and Jewish American writers and only one Native American writer - Scott Momaday. So, in this respect, some of the political and historical turns in recent American literary studies as reflected in the *Heath Anthology* turn out to be returnees in our context. At the same time because of the ideological and political changes in Eastern Europe, this return to class, race, history and politics is now met with hostility and boredom as issues which have been overexploited and overemphasized for the last 45 years of rigid ideological indoctrination. It looks like the gender aspect is the greatest innovation from our perspective along with the frontier in American literary and cultural studies. And again there is a certain amount of talking at cross-purposes - in our deeply patriarchal culture there is little gender sensitivity and awareness and women's issues are just beginning to be taken seriously, while in America the Gender Frontier is diminishing in a mass popular culture of gender benders. Yet, I do think that the historical and political turn in American literary and cultural studies could make us re-turn our attention to the question of difference and make a new turn in our own cultural and literary studies of America. Our aim should be to develop a sense of the richness and diversity of American culture through an examination not only of certain classical literary key texts and the social protest tradition (providing an extremely narrow framework) but through a variety of written, spoken, musical

and visual texts in a dynamic relationship, not as static artefacts but as part of a culture that is in a constant process of change and development. The multi-faceted nature of contemporary American society impells us to re-think the old categories of "high and low" culture (with us culture has always been high), of "progressive" and "reactionary", and to replace the dominant public and stereotypical views of America with much more personal, dynamic and intercultural views.

In many ways the cross-cultural reception of any literature into another could be viewed as a place of encounter between two or more collective consciousnesses, traditions, differences within and without. From my experiences as a translator and teacher of American literature, I have come to the conclusion that in transferring literary works into another cultural context what matters most is not the original text but the very movement between the respective cultures, the act of making or not making sense as they unfold, the crossing or reinforcing of the boundaries in-between. There are many possible strategies for cross-cultural transposition of difference, but basically they boil down to three major patterns. The first one is of quoting difference, a kind of description of the other - that is, describing its history, major symbols, values in an nonproblematic way, simply as different. The second pattern is of comparing difference, but from the perspective of our own framework, which results in pre-judgement, pre-conceptualisation and critique of the other culture. The third pattern is of staging difference, that is, representing the other culture in a performative act, a play arising out of the play of differences.

Unfortunately, my impressions are that the first two patterns have traditionally dominated the Bulgarian scene. Although differing in many respects these two patterns (of quotation and comparison-critique) have brought about similar, reductive acts of either preclosing the other or simply enclosing it. In the first case we remain "there," describing the other culture the way it describes itself;

in the second case we remain "here" without establishing real dialogue with the other, again seeking domination and victory. In practice, the complexity of cross-cultural relations often gets corrupted into inequality and/or indifference no matter whether we reject the other as totally incomprehensible or distort the other for our own purposes, or even if we accept the other as our own only to further reject it. Yet, these two patterns seem to be preferred because they are easier and quicker, something like "taking a short cut" to the other culture, metaphorically speaking. These two dominant patters come to show yet another tendency - namely, that in cross-cultural transfer of literature the aesthetic experience is mainly determined by the value system, prescriptions, norms and conventions of the receiving culture. The latter factors predetermine the importance of the local semiosis; that is, the foreign literary work/cultural product does not come into the receiving culture simply as an external object but is re-created from within the receiving culture. Here are a few examples from the Bulgarian scene illustrating the importance of the ideological and cultural coding and decoding mechanisms at work in the target culture, encouraging patterns of quotation and/or critique.

Socialist optimistic culture, the dominant culture for almost half a century in Bulgaria, has brought about strange phenomena in the reception of American literature in Bulgaria. I'm not going to discuss censorship, the ideological criteria for approving syllabi, certain missing genres or authors who were stigmatised as "decadent," "pessimistic," "sick," preaching "unclear messages," "doubt," "violence" and what not. I would rather focus our attention on certain tendencies arising out of a rigid ideological approach to cultural interpretation. The first obvious effect was simply the opposite of what the official cultural politics had aimed at. The numerous ideological constraints generated a counter-system of values, which started functioning within the framework of the official paradigm. What was forbidden, excluded or simply "cut out as unhealthy" automatically attained increased value. Thus the global ideological prohibitions generated global values - "westerness" becoming the supersign, the supervalue, erasing aesthetic and cultural values.

Parallel with this, there followed another negative tendency - a certain levelling effect for all American literature, that is, all American writers were equally "great" and all their works were equally important. Jack London, Henry James, Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway - they all spoke "Westeuropean" - with a pronounced American accent. They all came to be equally significant because they provided the reading public with that major value of "Westerness," not so much "Americanness" even. Together with the levelling effect there was another negative counter-effect in our socialist canon of Western and American literature. For example, certain American literary works, when transferred from their original context grew in value and stature in the receiving culture. Such has been the case with the novels and stories of Jack London, which, transplanted into our small, well ordered socialist society all of a sudden "grew" aesthetically and for years on end have stood for some of the best achievements of American literature. (More than half a million of his books have been published, which for a country of eight million people is really an amazing figure.) His works did not offer anything special in terms of form or ideas but they filled up a major vacuum of emotional freedom and mobility on the part of the reader as an individual. The general feeling of insufficiency of human existence in our enclosed society reduced the complexity of cross-cultural transfer to a mere transfer of information about the unknown Western reality. In most cases readers/students interpreted the fictional event as it related to their own lives, culture and value system and not to the original American culture and value system. These culturally and ideologically conditioned responses can explain the frequent cases of reversal and deformation of meaning when approaching American culture simply through quotation or critique. For example, the official socialist critics and press interpreted all western lieterature either in class-struggle terms or in terms of the crises of capitalism - the crisis of the family, the tragedy of the common people, the crushed capitalist dreams, the decomposition of everything, language included. The social (protest) element was always brought to the surface and emphasized, while the existential and

psychological aspects were toned down and ignored. This was most evident in the theatrical productions of Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard on the Bulgarian stage where all Freudian elements, psychological and sexual frustration, neurotic behaviour were transcribed into social problems and were replaced by the problems of poverty, social injustice, moral and spiritual degradation of capitalist society. Yet, the greater emphasis laid on darkness, psychotic obsessions, bitterness and loneliness in the morbid American social environment, the greater the liberating effect the productions had. Failure, alienation, despair and loneliness in the source culture were interpreted at home as positive, genuine feelings, as a chance to be on your own - independent from the collective, self-sufficient, free - that is, as sheer opposites to the optimistic collective socialist discourse, imposing a lot of limitations. In a similarly distorted way, American literature of protest against the establishment and bourgeois values (as for example, that of Jack Kerouac, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee) came to signify in the Bulgarian context not criticism of western values, but simply our longing for jeans, fast cars, change, mobility and of course freedom. Paradoxically enough, the reader was a latecomer in official literary research in Bulgaria, but that was not the case in the practical, real consumption of literature.

The above mentioned examples illustrate the two most recurrent patterns of transcultural reception of American literature - quotation and comparison-critique, both resulting in reduced connotative abilities and misunderstanding because of approaching difference either as indifference or inequality by constantly re-drawing the borders between "us" and "them", distant and close, familiar and unfamiliar and also because of being grounded in the logic of repetition, stereotyping and pre-judgement. Therefore, it is the third pattern - staging difference, that is most relevant for cross-cultural representation of American literature. I'm using the word "representation" not in the already established sense of mimesis, imitation of reality, but rather in the way the theorist Wolfgang Iser launches it as a way of

performing the foreign text to actually bring it into being and meaning in another context, as a "play arising out of the play of differences." Some of the basic characteristics of "play" elaborated by Iser - as "doubling," "oscillation" "shifting of focus frame" are extremely useful in analysing the reception of fiction as a transcultural event. If we extend Iser's model of textual figures to figures in the world then again the doubling perspective he advocates would allow the "simultaneity of the mutually exclusive" (1989 : 272), would prolong the encounter between the two communities and would trigger a reciprocal revealing and concealing of the two cultural traditions. Only in such a way will differences be represented without being obliterated because if differences are eradicated the oscillation movement will automatically be brought to a halt and the game will freeze. We preserve differences to keep the game going as well as to create a play space where the two different cultures can relate to each other, can meet each other without seeking domination or fearing engulfment. This model of "staging difference" can offer unique possibilities for extending and crossing the borders between various cultures in a world where everything is a "hybrid", a cross-over, where there is hardly any historically pure and homogeneous culture or language.

Therefore it is my deep conviction that the historical and political turn towards proliferation of difference along ethnic, race and gender lines in American cultural and literary studies can be of extreme significance not only for the growing world dissemination of American culture but also as a more serious and critical model for handling difference in any culture. From our perspective these latest tendencies do not simply mean expanding the American canon with women and minorities and diversifying the register with diaries and paperback romances; it is a stimulus for a new cultural politics of difference highlighting issues like class, race, gender, region, sexual orientation, age, nation and region that at this historical moment of transition call for a necessary re-evaluation and disruption from previous forms of cultural critique. Until recently no such historical categories and

divisions as class, race and gender have been officially recognized in our society, let alone studied in their intersections with ideology, power and society. We were all taken for granted as working-class heroes, simply work-hands, no matter whether women or men, Gypsies or Bulgarians. The individual did not matter, differences did not matter either - they were ignored, even disciplined and punished. Therefore by stressing the centrality of the questions of class, gender and race in our newly-divided contemporary society, the legacy of the latest developments in American literary/cultural studies could have a healing rather than disruptive effect. They could make us question and re-examine certain practices of male domination, national and cultural homogeneity, homophobia, the exclusion of popular culture, mediation of foreignness and difference as a whole.

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Notes

1. See Anthony D. King, ed. *Culture, Globalization and the World-System*, London:Macmillan Press, 1991, especially chapters 1,3 and 4.

2. See Larry Gordon, "Anthology Rattles Tradition," *Los Angeles Times*, August 27, 1990, p.1.

3. Preface to *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, D.C.Heath and Company, USA, 1990

4.Ibid.

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