

Symposium: Literary nationalisms

ESSE network

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For the past three years we have worked mainly on the question of the nation and its role in forming the so-called “national” literatures of Europe, beginning with the “nationalizations” of the 19th century. But the phenomenon of literary nationalism as such, which essentializes the historically created bond between literature and nation, which establishes a bond of necessity between literature and nation and which defines writers (poets, novelists or playwrights) primarily by their national belonging, has not yet been truly examined .

There is no longer need to point out the paradoxical self-evidence that literary nationalism is one of the most universally shared literary and political convictions whereas it is thought by its practitioners as an inalienable and unshakeable particularity, in particular because the national criteria are taught and learned at school. Alternatively, what is most often denied is the highly competitive nature of the phenomenon: more than the claim to the purported specificities of a national tradition, what actually defines each brand of literary nationalism is the form and the history of the competitive struggle waged by the literary space with other spaces. It is in this sense that the study of nationalisms is one of the crucial chapters in the analysis and understanding of the way the European, and more generally the international, literary space works.

At the same time, it appears that the only way of apprehending and analyzing this type of belief, as a (quasi) universal phenomenon, to be understood both as a whole and through each individual case, is to study it as an international occurrence. During this symposium, we therefore intend to approach literary nationalism as emanating from an international structure (as shown by the groundbreaking work of first Benedict Anderson and then Anne-Marie Thiesse) but also, to be sure, as emerging from relations embodied in individual histories (the work of Declan Kiberd, on the literary and national formation of Ireland is a prime example), in other words as one of the forms of the struggles waged in the international literary space.

This structural phenomenon can therefore not be reduced to a single dimension or a simple relation of cause and effect. Owing to the unequal structure of the world literary space, we have been able to show that literary nationalisms are neither equal nor symmetrical with respect to each other. They do not have the same weight, the same meaning, the same shape or form or the same force. In those literary universes that are emerging or sparsely endowed with specific resources, this belief dominates literary productions and enables the initial process of accumulating literary capital to get under way; in the older spaces, in particular in Europe, the most nationalist productions and authors strengthen the heteronomous zone of the literary field, which in these regions is the economic pole.

Main lines of the symposium

The aim of this meeting will therefore be to examine the forms of nationalist belief when it is materialized in a literary space, in other words to analyze certain types of struggle that unfold in the international literary space. The workshop will take their different configurations into account as well as the resulting effects.

We therefore suggest three principal directions for our work:

- 1 – Describe the mechanisms driving the appearance and essentialization of the connection literature/nation through various case studies that
 - a-are not limited to Europe
 - b-but which can also include the oldest European countries and the best endowed (Italy, Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland, etc.)

2 – Enlarge the investigation by addressing the state of the discussion in Great Britain and the United States (Fredric Jameson, Aijaz Ahmad, Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, etc.): bringing an international perspective to the issue of nationalism in its literary guise implies, insofar as possible, internationalizing and comparing the methods, traditions, theories and methodologies enabling us to think it.

3 – Outline a general model that would make it possible to establish the connection between the weight of this belief in each literary sphere (and thus its objective effects) and the degree of autonomy enjoyed by the literary space in question, which means taking into account the position occupied by this national space in the global literary space.