

BOOK REVIEW

LITERARY
THEORY AND
THE CHALLENGES
OF THE PRESENT

Vladimir Biti, *Tracing Global Democracy: Literature, Theory, and the Politics of Trauma*. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter. 2016, 394 pp.

Vladimir Biti's new book is a challenging read. To readers acquainted with his earlier publications this comes as no surprise; rather it confirms that Biti persists with the same rigor in his engagement with the past and present of human thinking. Nor does he in his new book relent with the demands he consistently makes of his readers. The minimum requirement to join him in his forays into thinking is an acquaintance with the greater part of Western thought. If that qualification were not rigorous enough, Biti does not merely gesture to this or that source within the tradition of thought, but actively engages in conversations with its representative figures. These conversations are not staged as one-on-one encounters but each staging beckons to the intellectual tradition as a whole. Rather than merely calling upon and quoting one predecessor or another, Biti engages them in dialogue. Whereas in his earlier publications he focused primarily upon literary theory and its relation to the literary archive, here Biti does not address that archive but takes it as the presupposed horizon of understanding, and the archive and the

theory associated with it are summoned to engage with and discuss, among other things, democracy, politics, the notion of the global, and cosmopolitanism.

This book is published by De Gruyter in its "Culture and Conflict" series, and Biti's text gestures to phenomena that a broad definition of culture ought to subsume. Additionally, his purchase on texts, writers, and those phenomena shows how these are conflictual or, in his words, "internally divided and antagonistic" (Biti 2016: 146). As he writes: "As cosmopolitanism splits into agencies and enablers, those who speak for it and those in the name of whom it speaks ... it necessarily contains an *internal redoubling*" (160). I highlight these utterances because they show what Biti uncovers and thematizes in his readings. He seeks out and addresses the "constitutive gap" of the texts so that perhaps the contention that "rather than being consistent and continuous, cosmopolitanism is a split and discontinuous undertaking" (160) can serve as a judgment pertaining not only to cosmopolitanism, but to every phenomenon to fall under Biti's scrutiny.

Biti's book consists of two parts. The first, entitled "Toward a Global Community: The Emergence of the Modern Idea of Literature", encompasses five chapters and deals with the rise and spread of the modern cosmopolitan idea of literature. In these chapters Biti revisits French and German authors from the Enlightenment and the early Romanticism period. Biti's collocutor in the first chapter, in which the author focuses upon the historical moment when literature emancipated itself from "traditional communities" to the unlimited horizon of the world, is Voltaire. Biti delineates the contours of the projected "free international exchange of idea" and what the

agenda of such a vision imposed upon literature, but his reading does not stop there. Rather, in a gesture symptomatic of his readings against the grain, he presents evidence that shows Voltaire's cosmopolitanism is compromised by the context in which it was implemented. That context was manifold. Voltaire's circumstances impacted upon putatively disinterested cultural policies. Second, Biti notes that the "economic base" of the idea of the "republic of letters" was an instrument of the logic of mercantilism, and mentions its involvement in the "shaping of the neoliberal world of economy and politics". Furthermore, Biti argues that Voltaire's ideal republic "did not countenance great swathes of populations" (44), that it was exclusionary, and that the notion of "citizenship" was as powerful an instrument of social closure as ethnicity. Biti shows how the idea of universal inclusion excluded a great deal of humanity or, to return to Voltaire, how "the French democratic parole of universal equality fed upon an enduring universal inequality and gradually became a symbol of oppression and humiliation" (54–55).

Biti opens the second chapter by looking at the "rise of the German national idea" at the close of the eighteenth century, which he presents as a response to the Europe-wide cultural expansion of France that unfolded throughout that century. In order to oppose the assimilationist thrust of French imperial cosmopolitanism, the "carrier group" promoting German "ethnic nationalism" worked toward ethnic homogenization. Biti does not stop here. In the second part of the chapter he shows how this division is additionally complicated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mme de Staël's resistance to the universalism promulgated by the Parisian intellectual

elite. The "schisms" that Biti delineates in this chapter show that if "the Enlightenment recalibration implied the universal expansion of the French polis, then the Romanticist reconfiguration ... implied contraction, narrowing down and solidifying isolation" (76). Biti's perspicacious reading not only does justice to an important point of European history, but provides profound evidence for a genealogy of our own contemporary moment.

The third chapter deploys another agenda in which to contrast and explore the French and German cultural models. Here Biti focuses upon the "concept of literary *Bildung*" which, as he summarizes in the preface, "now signifies public education directed toward the other, as well as private formation directed toward the self" (22). He argues that Enlightenment and Romantic concepts of literary *Bildung* "do not merely exclude but also imply each other" or, put differently, that the paradoxical relationship between the two projects is a "disabling enablement of one by the other" (84). In his intricate argument he enumerates both the differences and similarities in the two projects, and shows how the "normative work" of each teems with conflict. The manner in which Biti illustrates that the constitution of the national self breeds dissent regarding the question "as to which *particular* other is in the final analysis most suitable to contrastively determine the national self" (23) encapsulates a practice that is not confined to the period of immediate concern to his analysis.

In the fourth chapter Biti turns to the debate between Kant and Herder, in which the former professes human-kind and the latter nature "as history's uniting principles" (102). Biti shows that Kant's universalist claims and his

project of "cosmopolitan emancipation" "eventually turned out to be coupled with racial and national discrimination" (115). There is an insistent logic in that contradiction, which Biti summarizes as follows: "In order for one race to appear predestined for the infinite spiritual adventure, other races within the one and the same humankind were rendered desperately riveted to their finite corporeal destiny" (115). The second part of the chapter is devoted to Herder's "advocacy of nature". It shows that Herder's "naturalness" as it pertains to literature is graded: "the first-rate naturalness of ingenious literary works reserved for literatures of great European nations ... and the second-rank naturalness of folktales and folksongs reserved for Slavs" (131). But Biti imputes to Herder a judgment that is weightier than aesthetic valorizations: "Like 'Negroes' ... Slavs seem to be much closer to animals" (131). These "harshly discriminating consequences" are illustrative of the way Biti's forays into philosophy and literary theory implicate issues of "global democracy".

In the fifth chapter entitled "Who Worlds the Literature? Goethe's *Weltliteratur* and Globalization" Biti contests the claim that Marx, whom he deals with in passing, and Goethe, who receives most of his attention, are sources relevant to today's global world, which seems to have antiquated national literatures. Biti argues that Goethe's concept of *Weltliteratur* was not opposed to national literature but, on the contrary, should be understood as an effort to empower national literature against the pressure of a "rapidly and superficially" changing world. Addressing a number of more recent theorists, Biti maintains that whenever past thinkers are relied upon to legitimize present methodological

revolutions "they tend to be read one-sidedly and narrow-mindedly" (134). In that sense, Biti's rereading of Goethe goes against extant interpretations and, although he does not deny the legitimacy of Goethe's cosmopolitanism, he does question its claim to universal truth, showing it to be a "prejudice". As elsewhere, Biti's analytical objective is not, as he writes, to dispose of prejudice but "to lay bare the claim of these prejudices to the status of universal truths as a pretension *unsuitable for the dissensus constitutive of democracy*" (141–142). This is just one of the many instances in which Biti gestures to the main concept of his title.

Although each of the five chapters in the first part of the book can be read separately they mirror each other, contribute to the argument, and are cross-referenced. Likewise, the second part, entitled "An Observer under Observation: The Cosmopolitan Legacy of Modern Theory" offers self-contained readings, and further installments and elaborations of the foundational theses and arguments. If, to take another term from the title, the book focuses on "clandestine trauma narratives" as Biti writes in the introduction, and if the first part takes on the "diagnostic" task of identifying "covert narratives" in Voltaire, Herder, Kant and Goethe, then the second part updates the archive.

This second part of the book opens with a genealogy of the exilic consciousness of modern theory, pointing out how many literary theorists "developed their ideas out of the political dislocation and consequent linguistic and cultural displacement" (181), and how that outsider position can be traced back through the historical archive. The next chapter shows that poststructuralism is indebted to early Romanticism, and argues for the need to give proper weight

to Niklas Luhmann's autopoietic system theory. In a section of the chapter entitled "The European entangled legacy" (206–209) Biti rehearses numerous conceptualizations of the idea of Europe "as a consistent cosmopolitan self-creation" (207). Chapter eight explores the ways in which Russian Formalist writing can be viewed as a rewriting of Romantic cosmopolitanism in a distinct place and time. The Formalists' idea of "literariness" transformed literature from an instrument of national affirmation to its opposite: "Literature became an inducer of individual self-exemption from national constraints" (223–224). Next, Biti deals with Bakhtin and how his work exemplifies a consistent transgression of boundaries and a cosmopolitan expansion. He makes the point that the "traumatic constellation" of the Soviet Union was "the real source of Bakhtin's utopia of an all-equalizing world" (246). The tenth chapter explores the work of two immigrant generations of French literary theory (the structuralists and the poststructuralists) who articulated first an immigrant cosmopolitanism and then a cosmopolitanism of the disregarded. Summarily put, the last two chapters address the notion of "singularity" and its relation to the Cultural Studies project and, finally, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "deterritorialization" and how it pertains to democracy. In the epilogue, Biti gestures to the time in which the book was written as "the aftermath of what one might call high theory" (345) and engages with what he thinks is at stake when such pronouncements on the death of theory are being made.

From the preceding account it ought to be more than clear that Vladimir Biti does not accept these pronouncements. His work is more than theoretically in-

formed, as I implied at the beginning of this review. It bears witness to a belief in what theory can do. Paraphrasing his description of Derrida's "ethical responsibility", I see this book as being "populated by discordant views and divided up into the antagonistic many"; its encounter with the "exploded past" resists "consistency and semantic identity", drawing the author into an "infinite responsibility" toward theory's "vibrant plurality and heterogeneity" (349). As such it not only traces but exemplifies what democracy is: "Since by its very definition it can never be truly *accomplished*, democracy has to be continuously *implemented*, creating possibilities for the emergence of new forms of participation, new accommodations and, concomitantly, new agencies. Implementing it means untiringly opening the public space up to the new beginning, i.e. to its suppressed otherwise and missed possibilities" (103). At a time when the inflationary use of "democracy" tends to empty it of any significance, Biti's thinking of what it signifies makes us pause and take stock of both the word and what it means.

Biti addresses a cosmopolitan scholarly public, and it is that public that will ultimately judge this book. My review intends no more than to signal the importance of its publication. With these notes, I hope to have contributed to the recognition of Biti's work and its dissemination. I also hope that it will help convince those who are in a position to do so to give us a Croatian translation. Not only would such a translation update Biti's extant publications in Croatian, but it would be timely in an environment where the topics he deals with have more than an academic import.

Stipe Grgas