

YES, EUROPE IS A CONTINENT

Is not the geographical expression that is Europe, which has no clear cut natural borders, a purely political construction or is it really a true continent? The question has always divided geographers, linguists, scholars and political scientists

The mission that the CNES Space Observatory has entrusted to the network, Les Lettres Européennes, is a bold one: to take a satellite “snap” of the traces of literary life on the surface of the twenty-nine European countries in summer 2008 and measure their reactivity to the concepts of Union and space in the form of a collection of short stories. The anthology that follows should be considered as a totally innovative document which reflects and tries to answer this question at this point in time, the beginning of the 21st century.

The European Union – and this is one of the proofs of its democratic vitality – does not have, and in all the years of its existence has never had, a Union of Writers in the accepted ideological meaning of the term.

For the thirty authors in this book, no Jdanovian optimism to celebrate the conquest of space; no imposed *lingua franca* or official phraseology to evoke the grandeur of the young united Europe. Whoever opens this anthology will enjoy a collection of wonderful texts written by thirty different European authors, with contributions from twenty-six translators, a pleasure which only increases as the reader discovers the diversity of the various styles and genres used.

At each stage of the creative process – from the choice of the thirty authors as made by the network, Les Lettres Européennes, to the overseeing of the craftsmanship of the twenty-six translators – we have all felt the teeming diversity of contemporary writing in Europe imposing its dynamic.

Not one story in this collection is like any other, which is not so surprising when one knows that inviting authors to write a “novella” is already a polysemic instruction because, when one translates this word into certain languages, one encounters what translation specialists call an arborescence. For example, the Polish language differentiates between *nowela* and *opowiadanie*, two literary forms with different rules which in French would all be classed under one single term “nouvelle”.

On this basis can we define as “arborescence” either the Borges style fiction as created in north-western Europe or the Atlantic school drawing as it does on the experience of Mark Twain or yet again their Mediterranean cousin with its focus on world issues?

All share a dialectic concept: the notion of debt and gift, of inheritance and donation in relation to the rest of the world.

Bearing in mind all the constraints imposed by the genre, what then could be described as a typical European novella-writer, free from all extra-continental influences?

Yet how permeable, polyphonic, polymorphous is, this our literary Continent, with its shifting boundaries!

These thirty novellas will allow us to grasp how the word “space” is expressed in the mind and language of twenty-nine European countries and to measure to what extent the semantic fields of the various terms which describe it tally, overlap and diverge.

Fortunately for the requested satellite photo there was still the concept of Union, admittedly proteiform, but a reflection nonetheless of a shared reality that all of our languages are capable of conveying.

Yes, but...

Does the word Union help a citizen from the shores of the Mediterranean to share the same preoccupations as his European counterpart on the shores of the Baltic or those people who experienced a different history either side of the Berlin Wall for well nigh half a century?

However, in the thirty novellas assembled here there is a union. It reflects first and foremost the importance of the human being in the universe, it bears witness to a profound faith in mankind,

the ultimate safety net in extreme situations. Strangely, in this anthology in which the presence of progress and exact sciences is irrefutable, the unforeseeable, uncontrollable, unleashed element of human nature is cheerfully presented as something of value. Is it a reminder that the true scholar is one who imagines what strict logic rejects as impossible or that the true politician is one who dares to make what the establishment would consider a generous gesture?

The novellas in this selection cover the entire history of mankind. They anticipate the future with a twofold idea of progress from Creation to contemporary extremes, based on the interdependent relationship of the one with the other and the insatiable curiosity of rebellious minds. Humour is ever present but there is also immense sadness. On occasion, this book is a hymn to joy: a joy that is first born out of the relationship between man's inner space with our common shared space and finally with outer stellar space...

The end result is an authentic dialectic of the debt and the gift, and the inheritance and donation which is a true reflection of the continent of Europe. It underlines our way of questioning space.

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for Les Lettres Européennes