

ABHANDLUNGEN

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Revisiting the Problem of Central Europe Comparatively¹

Abstract

Rethinking Central Europe comparatively means crossing various topologies built up by the human *pathos* of identities and history's destroying or recreating collectivities. Of course, this comparative approach necessarily implies a dialectic process in which local and global, as well as the interaction between the two, must be considered. Inevitably broader issues arise, such as the notion of *Weltliteratur*. The following article considers the problems inherent in such an endeavor, especially for a region as difficult to define as Central Europe. The very label includes the root Europe; hence there is opposition between two terms, often expressed as East versus West or Oriental versus Western. Historical divisions have marked yet enriched the literature, as seen in the idea of resistance. Central European authors and critics have traditionally seen their literature as original because of the cultural conditions that transformed models or precursors such as Cervantes, Rabelais, and Goethe. Central European specificity thus stems from the dialectic interplay of literary elements, variable and invariable, as seen in the works of such authors as Kafka, Musil and Kundera, to name but a few. In seeking to define the region and *specifica* of its literature, the author outlines four characteristics and five types of discourse found in *Mittleuropa*. He concludes with three key questions for comparatists approaching the literatures of Central Europe.

I. Central Europe as a problem for comparative literature

„No European can be a complete exile in any part of Europe“
(Edmund Burke, *Letters on a Regicide Peace*, 1796)

„J'ai déjà eu l'occasion de noter, ici même, que si Pierre Gourou [author of several books and an article about China, *La Civilisation du Végétal*] avait l'art de renouveler les problèmes – ce n'est pas seulement parce qu'il était doué d'une force de raisonnement, ou, si l'on préfère, d'un sagesse de raisonnement peu commune. C'est parce qu'il usait parfaitement de ce grand instrument de compréhension qui s'appelle la méthode comparative.“

(Lucien Febvre, *Pour une Histoire à part entière*)

In the following remarks, when we refer to the problem of Central Europe, we

1 The author wishes to thank Kathryn Radford for all her help in editing this article.

mean its epistemological viability for a comparative approach to literature, broadly understood as the production of heterogeneous signs that are esthetic, social, historic, political, and so on. Note that in the above-quoted excerpt from the great French historian, Lucien Febvre, the comparative method is described as a great tool of understanding. Naturally we agree with Febvre but specify that only by comparing cognitive objects can we achieve a better understanding of more complex sets of problems and totalities. By comparing various literary works stemming from one geopolitical area, we may be able to establish the nature and function of their similarities. By subsequently comparing them with literary works stemming from other geopolitical areas, we may discern the interplay of meaning and structures that at the same time responds to the question of literature's specificity.

To rethink Central Europe in comparative mode is to turn sustained attention to the fact that this polysemic notion involves the interference of the local as well as the universal. Locally understood, Central Europe is a discontinuous territory that has its specific cultural aura. Universally imagined, *Mitteleuropa* belongs to a broader set of spacious realities and may be compared to other sociopolitical European or non-European provinces, smaller or larger than Central Europe. The question of aura is crucial. What is *mitteleuropäisch* may be aurally compared to Catalonia, Tuscany, Brianza (see Gadda), and - why not? - Patagonia, California or Baja California. However, any comparatist has to be dialectically oriented; in other words, any combined understanding of the universal and of the local must stress the interaction of the two.

II. Central tonalities of *Weltliteratur*

In the nineteenth century, starting in 1827, Goethe promoted the idea of *Weltliteratur*. He was convinced that the „inevitable result of the ever-growing search for universal truth would be a universal literature“.² In 1829, while meeting Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz in Weimar, Goethe agreed with him that the universal literature „would never lose the evidences of its ultimate national origins“.³

Around the idea and practice of *Weltliteratur*, an array of comparative studies based on the critical patterns of influence and interchange as well as a universally shared system of values has formed. It is worth pointing out here that Mickiewicz's reception in Germany is strongly determined by Goethe's understanding of *Weltliteratur*. Mickiewicz thus fits in with the following formulae, coined for the purpose of grasping his works' concretizations in a specifically positive context and climate: *Bildersaal der Weltliteratur*, *Allgemeine Geschichte der Weltliteratur*, *Perlen der Weltliteratur*, *Geschichte der Weltliteratur*.⁴ Undoubtedly, these critical patterns of influence and interchange may be subsumed under the category of intercultural studies. For historical and comparative purposes, it

2 Cf. Hildegard Schoeder's *Mickiewicz in Germany*. In: *Adam Mickiewicz in World Literature*. Ed. by Waclaw Lednicki. Berkeley, Los Angeles 1956, p. 171.

3 *Ibid.*

4 *Ibid.*

could also be understood as a reinterpretation of the three fields of comparative literature as they were defined in 1931 by Paul Van Tieghem in his *Littérature Comparée*, that is to say: doxologie, (study of opinions and of influences); mé-sologie (study of contacts and of mediation) and crénologie (study of sources). Essentially, what one notices here is the meaningful dependence of a literary phenomenon or process on a given network of interrelated and diversified angles of focus. Mickiewicz's poetry is *weltlich* because it is also national and thus exemplifies Goethe's conceptual mediation which stresses a functional unity between the local and the universal.

The mosaic of languages, some hegemonically oriented, for instance German or Russian, have engendered various and complex cultural and literary facts. How should we measure the universality of *War and Peace*, given that Tolstoy's main goal was to represent the Russian people as they were, aristocrats and peasants alike? Do the multiple sentences written in French in this novel signify a willingness to be 'European' and cosmopolitan, or to tell the truth about the Russian aristocracy who so frequently spoke French? Without wanting to sound like a slogan, we may ask ourselves whether Tolstoy's vision is locally universal or universally local?

We can assume that a Central European awareness determines to a significant extent the enormous, unfinished novel by Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*. How does this universally concretized novel express its Central European identity? All-encompassing irony may be the clue. It is not Schlegelian irony with an interplay of *Selbsterschöpfung* and *Selbstvernichtung*. Musil's irony as a 'form of struggle', is joyful and playful. It is full of intentionally humorous innuendoes and of double, if not multiple identities which hide under clerical seriousness the Bolshevism of the same identity. Such are *à peu près* the words of Musil, theorist of irony. Musilian irony is thus humorously frivolous and comically tragic. It denounces the ever-growing existential status of kitsch which penetrates everyday life. The multiple portraits which cross the novel draw on the ironic vision of the human condition and synthesize contradictory features which combine a false *pathos* with the platitude of character. Leontine alias Leona (see the Chapter 6: Leona or „A Shift of Perspective“) who is „a singer in a small cabaret“ sings what the narrator characterizes as follows: „All these old-fashioned little songs were about love, sorrow, constancy, loneliness, woodland whispers and twinkling trout.“⁵ From Musil's descriptions and comments, from his constant ironizing emerges a specific aura which is *mitteleuropäisch*. It is a mixture of the local fate and universal nostalgia, a dialectic of frivolous innuendoes and cruel seriousness.

A comparative approach has to take into account both local specificities and universal concretizations. We should be aware of the fact that the recent numerous critical treatments of Europe stress its diversity and its cultural richness beyond any necessary common denominators, apart from that of 'Europe'. On this topic, Norman Davies emphasizes the following:

5 Robert Musil: *The Man without Qualities*. Transl. by E. Wilkins and E. Kaiser. London 1954, II, p. 436.

„For cultural historians of Europe, the most fundamental of tasks is to identify the many competing strands within the Christian tradition and to gauge their weight in relation to various non-Christian and anti-Christian elements. Pluralism is *de rigueur*. Despite the apparent supremacy of Christian belief right up to the mid-twentieth century, it is impossible to deny that many of the most fruitful stimuli of modern times, from the Renaissance passion for antiquity to the Romantics' obsession with nature, were essentially pagan in character. Similarly, it is hard to argue that the contemporary cults of modernism, eroticism, economics, sport, or pop culture have much to do with the Christian heritage. The main problem nowadays is to decide whether the centrifugal forces of the twentieth century have reduced that heritage to a meaningless jumble or not. Few analysts would now maintain that anything resembling a European cultural monolith has ever existed.“⁶

If Europe was not and is not a „cultural monolith“ one has to grasp the unifying function of the persistent name itself, Europe, used in various contexts. Is it a real cultural, spiritual or geographical basis of unification of so many and various cultural territories or is its function rather mythical? To what extent can we consider Central Europe a coherent entity that projects a coherent and systematic discourse on various literatures written and read within its spatial limits?

If we define Central Europe in terms of geographical space and geopolitics, how can we determine, measure and utilize analytically the unifying principles that are at the basis of what is, nevertheless, an ambiguous concept of Central Europe? How central and how peripheral is Central Europe, and what are its links with Europe proper? How should we tackle the problem of this emergent versatile category, which combines various elements, such as geography, history, religion, cultural memory, literary and artistic discourse, and specific values?

What kind of comparative method, and more precisely, which language of comparative literature, does one have to use in rethinking the problem of Central Europe? We know that the recent evolution of comparative literature has tended toward an opening up of new spaces for new objects and problems. Feminist studies, postcolonial studies, and ethnic studies among others constitute these new spaces. On the other hand, comparative literature is increasingly addressing issues regarding the specificity of those objects of analysis which are looked upon more as distinct entities than as items in a reciprocal relationship of comparison. Overarching quantifiers must thus be used with extreme caution.

III. ‚Central Europe‘ versus ‚Europe‘

„One thing, however, must be well understood in advance: a positive answer will not necessarily mean that the Western Europe so enlarged remained entirely homogeneous. On the contrary, a further study of the regional divisions of Europe will reveal the development of very different regions within the western half of the continent.“
(Oscar Halecki, *The Limits and Divisions of European History*)

First of all, we have to ponder Central Europe as both a problematic and useful

6 Norman Davies: *Europe, A History*. New York, Oxford 1996, p. 9-10.

notion. We should recognize the fact that within its interior Central Europe is as diversified as Europe itself. Again Norman Davies provides perspicacious insight in his book *Europe, A History*:

„The label *Europe*, like the earlier one of ‚Christendom‘, can hardly be arrogated by one of its several regions. Eastern Europe is no less European for being poor, or undeveloped, or ruled by tyrants. In many ways, thanks to its deprivations, it has become more European, more attached to the values which affluent Westerners can take for granted. Nor can Eastern Europe be rejected because it is ‚different‘. All European countries are different just as all West European countries are different.“⁷

Comparatively seen, the highly diversified ‚region‘ of Central Europe may be described as a historical and cultural object that should be treated contextually, as a dialectic of civilization, culture, history, values and works of art.

What sort of problems pertaining to the scholarly field of comparative literature does the very notion of Central Europe involve? Given the fact that the arguments in favor of its existence take for granted the unity and specificity of Central European literature, one has to query the specific features of literary works stemming from this geographical and geopolitical area. We then have to examine the arguments of those who exalt and use this concept, as well as the arguments of those who reject it. Consequently, we have to ask ourselves whether presupposed certainty of the notion of Central Europe does not in fact arise from ideological beliefs, and whether stubborn uncertainty or refusal of the same notion does not trigger consequences that may jeopardize comparative scrutiny of the various literatures of so-called Central Europe.

It is necessary to recognize that Central Europe contains *Europe* as a basic term of reference. However, as we all know, throughout history there has been a problem with the status of Europe. There has been a problem with its mythological past, its problematic unity, its centripetal and centrifugal tendencies. Wandering among sweeping statements and more or less precise definitions, one stumbles over the following well known *boutade* of Paul Valéry, who in his *Variété* affirms:

„L'Europe deviendra-t-elle *ce qu'elle est en réalité*, c'est-à-dire un petit cap du continent asiatique? Ou bien l'Europe restera-t-elle *ce qu'elle paraît*, c'est-à-dire: la partie précieuse de l'univers terrestre, la perle de la sphère, le cerveau d'un vaste corps.“⁸

This well-known statement emphasizes a sort of tragic ambiguity. Doomed to be a cape of Asia, Europe has just one alternative: to remain what it appears to be; in other words, the most precious part of the earthly universe, the pearl of globe, the brain of a vast body. Dating from the European politics of Konrad Adenauer and Robert Schumann, we can admit that this tragic ambiguity is no longer the driving force of multiple reflections on Europe. What is underlined is rather its paradoxical, spiritual and intellectual status. „Tragic humanism is the legacy of

7 Ibid., p. 28.

8 Paul Valéry: *Deuxième lettre*. In: *Variété*. Paris 1924, p.24.

Europe," André Malraux said at a Université de la Sorbonne conference, in 1946.⁹

The unity and uniqueness of Europe have been frequently emphasized by so many writers and thinkers that it would be beyond the scope of this article to list even the most typical of their definitions or affirmations. One or two comments, however, will help us understand the problem of Central Europe.

For Ernst Robert Curtius, the unity of Europe resides in its common Greek and Roman heritage. He testifies to this heritage in his work on *Europäische Literatur und Lateinisches Mittelalter*, which dates from 1948. For Curtius, the unity of European literature means an atemporal present of literature, that is to say, what one can define as transmigration of the past into the present, the presence of Homer in Virgil, Homer in Joyce, or Dante and Tristan Corbière in T.S. Eliot. A temporally and spatially expansive repertory of literary figures and genres contributes to establishing the unity and universality of European literature. In his 1954 book, translated later as *Essays on European Literature*, Curtius emphasizes the same element:

„Rome is the mother of the West. I had read in Camposanto near San Pietro, the inscription: Teutones in pace; it is a word that I tried to translate in my personal way. My studies and my travels next led me to Spain. From Madrid a transversal line cuts Europe up to the Vienna of the Habsburgs. On this line I met Hofmannsthal, whom I always venerated as a master. Thus every day Europe was becoming for me broader and broader and richer and richer. But all the Europeans, even Germans inside the limes were holding the mark of Rome [...]. [...]

I have always defended the same values: the European awareness and the Western tradition [...]. The continuity was more important for me than the present: I found more meaning in Virgil and in Dante than in modern literature after the death of Goethe.“¹⁰

Curtius' opinion is idiosyncratically and problematically right. It is an obvious expression of a Eurocentrism reduced to its Western superstructure. „Unfortunately“, says Norman Davies, „European historians have frequently approached their subject as Narcissus approached the pool, looking only for a reflection of his own beauty“.¹¹

For Curtius, Europe is Christian and Western. He maintains a distant attitude toward Eastern Europe. Central Europe can only be an imitation of Western Europe. We know, however, how creative this region of Europe is. Its creativity is not only European but also rooted in the regional soil.

Returning to Curtius' interpretation of Western civilization and taking into account his decoding of Western Europe, and, by the same token, of Central Europe, we can ask ourselves to what extent all this can be said about Central Europe? Does it cultivate the same traditions? Does it inscribe the same names

9 Conference en Sorbonne In: *La Politique, la culture*. Paris 1986, quoted in: *Europes, De l'antiquité au XXe siècle, Anthologie critique et commentée*. Ed. by Yves Hersant, Fabienne Durand-Bogart. Paris 2000, p. 934.

10 Ernst Robert Curtius: *Preface to First Edition*. In: *Essays on European Literature*. Princeton, N.J. 1973, p.xxv.

11 Davies: *Europe, A History*, p.16.

and literary figures into its art and literature? One must acknowledge the fact that those who defend the idea of Central Europe as similar to and different from Europe proper underline its specific characteristics which both stress its belonging to, and claim its difference from, Western Europe. Such a paradoxical vision does justice to the artistic and literary richness and complexity, as well as the innovation, proper to this imprecisely designated region. Still, beyond this geographical and spiritual imprecision arises a mythical place called 'Central Europe'.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, while visiting Poland, described a poor and simple apartment in a district of Warsaw called Prague in the following way:

„We are now sitting in this abstractly imagined place called Central Europe, which is constituted by a few thousand of such apartments widely spread out on the map: Zagreb, Brno, Budapest, Vienna, Cracow, Trieste, Berlin.“¹²

This abstractly imagined place gains in precision and in historical concreteness as its definitions multiply.

Let us recall that such writers as Miroslav Krleža¹³ and Peter Esterházy¹⁴ reject the idea of the existence of Central Europe as a unique and specific entity. In contrast, such poets and writers as Miłosz, Michnik, Konrad, and Kiš are convinced that the concept is both justifiable and operational historically, politically, esthetically.

Magris, while stressing the existence of a concept of *Mitteleuropa*, accepts the fact that Central Europe has its own characteristics, which are of a historic, cultural, social and political nature.

And it is Czesław Miłosz who gives the most provocative definition of Central Europe, insisting on the historical and political dimension of the problem:

„Let me risk a very simple definition of Central Europe: all the countries that in August 1939 were the real or hypothetical object of trade between the Soviet Union and Germany. This means not only the area usually associated with the idea of centrality, but also the Baltic states – thus, the area where I was born.“¹⁵

We add George Steiner's remarks about being a citizen of Central Europe:

12 Hans Magnus Enzensberger: *Ach Europa, Wahrnehmungen aus sieben Ländern. Mit einem Epilog aus dem Jahre 2006*. Frankfurt/M. 1989, p. 344.

13 M. Krleža: *Essais, littérature, politique, histoire*. Ed. by P. Matvejevic. Zagreb 1973, p. 242-243.

14 P. Esterházy: "The Budapest Roundtable". In: *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central European Culture* 10 (1991), p. 27: „I believe that the notion of a Central European writer came about from defensive thinking, from fear. We defend ourselves against all kinds of superpowers, all kinds of ignorance, and as a result, we are herded into fences of Central European literature. This is very comfortable, very good, and very useful, but not really serious and not at all realistic. That is all I wanted to say.“

15 Cf. all sorts of observations on the subject in „The Budapest Roundtable“. In: *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central European Culture* 10 (1991), p. 17-30. This event took place in June 1989. Participants included H.C. Artman, P. Esterházy, D. Kiš, G. Konrad, E. Limonov, C. Magris, C. Miłosz, P.-E. Rummo, M. Meszoly, and A. Michnik.

„I come from Central Europe, from a world which has been reduced to ashes and which just begins to be reborn in a spasmodic way. I feel myself to be a European Jew who oscillates in a square defined by Leningrad and Odessa on the one side, and Paris and Milan on the other, and Frankfurt with Prague and Vienna as a center. It is a great homeland of Benjamin, Adorno, Ernst Bloch, Freud and Lukacs. A spiritual nation, an internal world.“¹⁶

This passionate description of Central Europe relies basically on the ‚centrality‘ of the center. It must be acknowledged that the space of Central Europe in fact manifests a more extensive topology.

IV. Visions, Zones, Meta-zones

„Europe is always a project, and the problematization, the essential feature of its culture.“

(Yves Hersant, *Préface in Europes*)

Summing up these critical or positive opinions and attitudes regarding Central Europe, we would like to put forth the following: even though Krleža and Esterházy reject the idea of the real existence of Central Europe, one has to take into account the validity of their arguments because they are strongly debatable. For Krleža, Central Europe is a commodity of politicians who act according to the principle *divide et impera*. Here, we should point out that Krleža’s opinion is apparently determined by his understanding of Friedrich Naumann’s writings and actions regarding Central Europe.¹⁷ In his writings on Central Europe, Naumann envisages the foundation of a federation of Central European states under the leadership and hegemony of Germany. His political vision of this region of Europe is quite strongly and ideologically panGermanic. It is obvious that Krleža could not accept conceiving of Central Europe in this manner.

For Esterházy, fear and defensive thinking lie at the basis of the invention of Central Europe. However, this type of negative argument could be positively reversed. We should like to emphasize the fact that all the countries which enter the space and zones encompassing Central Europe share a common historical and pragmatic characteristic. That is to say the ethics and agonics of resistance. Hence a possibility of enlarging the validity of Milosz’s definition. It concerns both the countries that were dependent on the Austro-Hungarian Empire and those which were the victims of the Russian empire and of Prussian active participation in various divisions and reconfigurations of Europe. The ethics and the agonics of resistance are the distinctive historical feature of numerous countries which we should consider Central European countries culturally, historically and artistically. We have to recognize that the adjective *Central* acquires various geographical, cultural, historical and intellectual specificities. We should recall what German and Austrian historians have emphasized, that is to say, the

¹⁶ George Steiner: *Entretiens*. Paris 2000

¹⁷ Cf. Friedrich Naumann’s *Schriften zum Mitteleuropaproblem*. In: *Werke*. Vol. 4. Köln, Opladen 1964, p. 374-979.

necessity of distinguishing between *Ostmitteleuropa* (Eastern Central Europe), *Südostmitteleuropa* (Southern, and not Balkan, Central Europe) and, even, *Westmitteleuropa* (Western Central Europe).¹⁸

Here two questions seem to be crucial: that of, if not common, at least continuous, territory, and that of regionally oriented national identities. The continuously discontinuous territory of Central Europe is what we propose to name the telescoping interspace of the countries which are situated along the Danube. In Claudio Magris' book *Danube*, there is a map on which are represented various national spaces: on the West side from Donaueschingen in Germany, Schwarzwald, very close to the French border up to the delta of the great river; on the South-East side where three Rumanian cities - Tulcea, Chilia Veche and Sulina - constitute a triangle touching the Black Sea.

In this geographical configuration some countries are not marked: Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia. Some other countries are just shyly mentioned: Poland, Czechoslovakia, the Northern Part of Germany. More significantly, this map indicates the interspatial zones and meta-zones of the imagined community of Central Europe. It is an axiological community sharing the same system of values based above all on the ethics of resistance. Throughout history emerge and circulate the cultural values which in this poly-zonal space signify the interaction of various nodal spiritual forces. According to Magris, „[t]he Danube signifies *Mitteleuropa* which is Germanic-Magyar-Slavic-Judeo-Roman. It is something virulently opposed to the German Reich which is Germanic, oecumenical, international“.¹⁹ *Mitteleuropa* is based on the numerous nodal places which are not only the capitals, Vienna, Budapest, Prague, Bucharest, Belgrade, but also Bratislava, Cracow, Pecs, Szeged, Novi Sad, Timisoara, Cluj.

In order to circumscribe Central Europe as the dialectically global distinctive stability of regions and of regionally oriented identities, one has to acknowledge that the global stability is due to the Austro-German attraction which acts as a great *Kulturnation* and as German universalism (see Heinrich Ritter von Srbik: *Deutsche Einheit, Idee und Wirklichkeit vom Heiligen Reich bis Königgrätz*, München 1940). The German universalism is a nodal basic element of *Mitteleuropa*. However, one has to detach Nazi Germanism from this universalism. Here *Mitteleuropa* undergoes the process of degeneration of German culture which is otherwise praised for its intensity and for the fact that it underlay the tension between life and value and between existence and order.

Mitteleuropa is a coincidental encounter between various national identities and a general meta-topological historically determined system of values. *Mitteleuropa* plays out its harmonious cultural, inter-national identity as a community of similar historical collective experiences.

18 Cf. Jacques Le Rider: *Pour une histoire interculturelle de la production littéraire de langue allemande en Europe centrale*. In: *Les littératures de langue allemande en Europe centrale. Des Lumières à nos jours*. Ed. by J. Le Rider and F. Rinner. Paris 2000, p. 23-24.

19 Claudio Magris: *Danube*. French transl. by Jean et Noelle Pastureau. Paris 1986, p. 35.

V. Specific forms and matters: from facts of life to literary or other works

„[...] zazracny jako buh / a mocny jako buh / jsem vic, / jsem jeste mnohem vic,
/ a prece nejsem nic / nez milosti zastupi pokorne odevzdany / basnik / [...]“

„[...] marvelous as God, / almighty as God / and even more / still more
/ although I am only wholeheartedly / given to people / poet / [...]“
(Jaroslav Seifert, *The Most Humble Poem*, translated by Wladimir Krysiniski)

Milan Kundera, who strongly advocates the political, cultural, historic, artistic and literary functionality of Central Europe, defines it paradoxically.

For Kundera, Europe has already been losing its identity for some time. Consequently, „A European is a person who has nostalgia of Europe.“²⁰ In this negative European or meta-European context, Kundera insists on the vitality of art and literature in Central Europe. It is an „immense baroque force“ which, according to Kundera, gives a certain cultural unity to this region.²¹ In the hierarchy of arts, music comes first. Central Europe may not have had a Flaubert in the nineteenth century but it has certainly had some great poets. Basically, however, the region is dominated by the spirit of Biedermeier. Things changed in the twentieth century. The greatest Central European minds have revalorized what was unknown and forgotten for centuries: the rational demystifying lucidity; the sense of the real that culminates in the novel. Kundera insists upon the fact that Central European modernism is different from French modernism. If the former is antirational, antirealistic, lyrical; the latter criticizes and disqualifies romanticism, likes the pre-Balzacian novel and *l'esprit libertin*. The great Central European novelists Kafka, Hašek, Musil, Broch, and Gombrowicz do not trust history and the exaltation of the future. Their modernism is beyond any illusion of the avant-garde. Kundera synthesizes the problem in the following way:

„The destruction of the Empire and, after 1945, the cultural marginalization of Austria and the political non-existence of other countries, make of Central Europe the premonitory mirror of all of Europe's possible destiny, the laboratory of the twilight.“²²

What may be useful comparatively is the way in which Kundera poses the problem of the meaning of a literary work. By juxtaposing Central Europe and Europe, he recalls Hermann Broch's reaction to an editor who wanted to situate Broch's work within the Central European context along with Hofmannsthal and Svevo. Broch protested and suggested a comparison with Gide and Joyce. In Kundera's comment, Broch did not want to deny his Central-Europeaness, „he just wanted to say that national or regional contexts have no validity if one intends to capture the meaning and value of a given work“.²³ Kundera then calls for the notion of world literature and assigns to the exercise of comparing literary works only the task of determining their sense and value.

20 Milan Kundera: *L'art du roman. Essai*. Paris 1986, p. 158.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid. p. 159.

23 Ibid., p. 159-160.

Although convincing and certainly correct, Kundera's vision of Central Europe rests upon a strong attachment to the great artistic or literary canons. The universality is assumed and confirmed through the already well established position of a literary or artistic work within a generally recognized system of values. Hence one can easily perceive in Kundera's criticism an obvious teleological dimension. Art and literature embody a given axiological direction of their individual works. For Kundera, comparing implies comparing only the greatest. Of course, one can either reject or accept this position. However, as far as the problem of Central Europe is concerned, one must take into account the undeniable fact that its recognition in terms of culture and art has been conquered only through works which have been extensively translated into the main Western languages. Kundera's analysis constantly evokes the works of universal reputation. Consequently they cannot be other than original, unique, unclassifiable. In a way, Kundera's approach is based on the almost tautological explanation of artistic and literary greatness. The more a work is important, the more it must be great and unique. And importance should be measured on the basis of a series of discoveries that are implicit for any great work of art or of literature.

What is certain is that Kundera creates a new critical paradigm. His description of Central Europe's art and literature ingeniously combines elements stemming from Western European literatures, e.g. the pre-Balzacian novel, and those irreducible to any other literature, e.g., the rational, demystifying lucidity.

Kundera is a comparatist with only one theoretical credo: the necessity to recognize as a significant axiological event the existence of universal literature. Positioning and deciphering meaning and values can be done only by comparing different works belonging to a specific thematic and formal discourse which should be defined in terms of Goethe's *Weltliteratur*. It is only by positioning a work within the limits of world literature that meaning can be bestowed upon it.

The critical paradigm of Kundera may be called 'comparative by induction'. It triggers an interrelational vision of literature in which every work refers inductively to a model which it problematizes, corroborates and transforms. Central Europe as cultural force is unreal and impossible without referring to Rabelais, Cervantes, Diderot, Goethe, Flaubert, and Joyce. The originality of Central European literature thus resides in the fact that it was always related to the social, political and cultural conditions in the context of which it transformed models and interacted with precursors' structures to lend them a new artistic and esthetic aura. The function of precursor is therefore quite particular. A precursor is not an influential force but rather a transformable and dialectizable target. Kundera's comparative critical paradigm presupposes the awareness of the transformability and of the extensiveness of the invariant elements in literature. Central European literature thus acquires its specificity through an interplay of dialectizable elements that refer to some great models.

VI. *Differentia specifica* of Central European esthetics of resistance

„[...] I felt the melancholy even if the time wasn't sultry and dreary, the melancholy dripped from the words. [...] The urge to relate to the stars, which were unreachable and untouchable, began then I believe, and increased into an astral religion during the next few years. I held them too high to grant them any effect on my life, I turned to them purely for the sight of them, I was fearful when they withdrew from me, and I felt strongly when they reappeared where I could hope for them. I awaited nothing from them but the regularity of their return, the same place and the consistent relationship to their fellow stars, with which they formed constellations, that had wondrous names.“

(Elias Canetti, *Melancholy and History in The Tongue Set Free*)

In Central European literature humor, irony, wit, „rational lucidity“, novel, baroque, dystopia, and existential discourse undergo specific transformations and give rise to such works as *The Good Soldier Chveik* (J. Hašek), *The Trial* (F. Kafka), *The Confessions of Zeno* (Svevo), *The Man Without Qualities* (Musil), *The Insatiability* (S.I. Witkiewicz), *The Banquet in Blituanian* (M. Krleža), *Auto-da-fe* (Canetti), *Ferdydurke* (Gombrowicz), *The Death of Virgil* (Broch), *The Sleepwalkers* (Broch), *The Return of Philippe Latinovic* (Krleža), *Migrations* (M. Tsernianski), *The Improvement of Central Europe* (O. Wiener), *The Founders* (G. Konrad), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (Kundera), *The Tomb for Boris Davidovitch* (D. Kiš), *Dictionary of the Khazars* (M. Pavic), and *The Auxiliary Verbs of the Heart* (P. Esterházy).

The thematics and structures of these works demonstrate the above-mentioned transformations and extensiveness in the interplay of the invariant elements. Consequently Rabelaisian and Cervantine humor and irony become more dialectical and compositional elements in Hašek, Kafka, Musil, Krleža, Gombrowicz, and Kundera. Modulations of various themes, inscription of History and of collective memory, and meta-discourse preside over transformations of the novel in Broch, Svevo, Musil, Gombrowicz, O. Wiener, Kiš and Kundera.

If Central Europe is a partly imaginary region or if it is a real and specifically drawn geographical territory where a *mitteleuropäisch* element specifically understood crosses the European one, one may propose the following four specific characteristics of Central European literature(s).

- A) Philosophical, rhapsodic and meditative poetry: Nezval, Seifert, G. Ilyes, Herbert, Miłosz, Szymborska, V. Holan, Miodrag Pavlovitch, Lucian Blaga, Nichita Stănescu
- B) Catastrophism, humor, irony: Hašek, Witkiewicz, Canetti, Mircea Eliade (*The Old Man and the Bureaucrats*), Krleža, Gombrowicz, Kiš, P. Goma, D.R. Popescu, Kundera
- C) Existential discourse: Svevo, Musil, Krleža, Gombrowicz, Kiš, Marin Sorescu
- D) Novel as a metadiscourse of the novel: Musil, Witkiewicz, Broch, Gombrowicz, Wiener, Kiš, Kundera, Costache Olăreanu, M.H. Simionescu (*The Tirgoviște – School of Fiction*)

This schematic representation of the distinctive features of Central European literature does not claim to be exhaustive. Instead it draws attention to the intensification of certain elements which decisively contribute to creating a European meta-referential discourse in order to put into dialectics what is European with what is Central European. A good example of this dialectics is a highly intertextual and metatextual novel by Oswald Wiener *Die Verbesserung von Mitteleuropa* (The Improvement of Central Europe). The narrator passionately expresses his relativizing attitude towards what is European and what is Central European. He finally creates a novel-treatise. It means that intellectual discussion and scrutiny such as Wiener conveys them throughout his discourse give infinite perspectives for a possible improvement of Central Europe. It has to deal with Europe constantly and to find its self-identity through the problematic and complex identity of Europe.

As a matter of fact there is a possibility of pushing this problematized description of Central European literature a little further. We can interpret it much more in terms of specific literary forms stemming from both the Central European imagination and from the community of the historical experiences underwent and filtered through the ethics and agonics of resistance. It is useful to take into consideration the numerous literary discourses of the writers already mentioned and to understand their Central European particularity on the basis of five more specific categories. Here they are:

- A) total satire: Hašek, Krleža, Mrozek
- B) philosophical grotesque: Witkiewicz
- C) catastrophic Weltanschauung: Witkiewicz, Krleža, Kiš
- D) optimistic pessimism: Kundera, Kantor
- E) anti-institutional irony: Musil

Any comparatist probing the problem of Central Europe is facing the spiritual presence of strange, hybrid cultural and literary phenomena. They have been identified as Central European because they are different from West-, East-, South- and North-European. However, 'European' remains a cultural invariant which determines the way in which Europe survived various attempts to destroy itself. 'European' also means not American, therefore its specific cultural individuality triggers the dialectics of resistance which enable us to catch the differential meaning of *Mitteleuropa*. It is a common spiritual homeland of some countries but not quite. It is not the absolute denying of other countries but rather an insistence on their own identities. *Mitteleuropa* is not like an *auberge espagnole* where anything goes. It is above all an existential and ontological encounter of space and time, of the nightmare of history and the joy of culture as collective and strongly loaded memory.

To rethink Central Europe comparatively means to be sensitive to the variation of themes and structures which have by no means been invented in this region. Pre-existing in the European tradition, they became rather the operators of transformation of the literary discourse whose primary task was and is to inscribe in its body the monstrosity of history and of totalitarianism. This varia-

tion of themes and structures show how the collective and cultural memory as well as the shared value system underlies the artistic specificity of Central Europe.

VII. Three questions for comparatists attempting to understand the literatures of Central Europe

„L'explication géographique totale du paysage ne doit pas consister dans la mise en rapport de deux termes, l'un constitué par les éléments physiques, l'autre par les éléments humains - mais l'examen de trois catégories de données, qui sont: les éléments physiques, la civilisation, les éléments humains“

(Pierre Gourou, *La Civilisation du Végétal* in Lucien Febvre's *Pour une Histoire à part entière*)

How has history transformed countries, cities, spaces, zones and meta-zones, giving them a specific Central European identity? How has it created values inside communities? How do literary works commit themselves to an organic work of metaphysical vision of the world and how do they manage to be humoristic, total and grotesque, at the same time?

These questions should be addressed to any actual or potential comparatist for whom understanding literature has above all historical, cultural and, last but not least, recurrent telluric reasons and justifications.

Rethinking Central Europe comparatively means crossing various topologies build up by intensity of human *pathos* of identities and by capricious history destroying and recreating collectivities. What then gets to be compared? Above all cultural and historic signs such as they engender literatures. Wisdom of languages, intuition and knowledge of either reciprocal or excluded existences in what is magically identifiable as Central Europe. By no means a colony of Europe; by all means, a region full of intercommunicating zones and nodes with an interplay of identities irreducible to any other.

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