

## Comparative Critical Studies

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penetration, women could describe their amative relations as chaste' (p. 230). The level of theoretical and practical sexual knowledge of the average middle-class woman in the nineteenth century is difficult to ascertain. A tentative or strategic reader might therefore want to focus on what her sources could imply rather than on what they irrevocably prove – a difference in methodology and intent that highlights the diverging agendas of queer theory and lesbian and gay studies. Instead of the insistence on vaginal and clitoral metaphors in the most unlikely places and occasional speculation about what did and did not happen between the sheets, more subtle contextualized close readings might have teased out more ambiguity and erotic potential, and resulted in interpretations more attuned to the difficulties of accommodating desire conceptually and emotionally. It is left to the imagination what readers of the calibre of Terry Castle, Eve Sedgwick or John Carlos Rowe might have made of the deliciously purple prose of Eliza Linton's *The Rebel of the Family* (1880) which gave us the first 'lesbian' villain, or of Vernon Lee's 'Prince Alberic'. There is the odd nod to queer theory or gender studies, but this volume does not aim for new conceptual territory or sustained critical debate. If, however, ~~expressing~~ homosexual desire predating or outside the purely psycho-medical discourse was the actual difficulty, carving out interpretive space for sexual possibilities and erotic frissons in textual ambiguities beyond actual knowledge and documented practice might be the best way to honour historic conditions.

CHLEL XX + XX

PETRA RAU

Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (eds.), *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries*. 2 Vols. (= *A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*, 19). Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004 and 2006; ISBN 90-272-3452-3 (Vol. 1), 90-272-5453-1 (Vol. 2); €198 (Vol. 1), €190 (Vol. 2).

*History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* is a significant and monumental venture, comprising four volumes, two of which have already been published. It forms part of the series *Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages*, and follows on from the publication of the *History of Literature in the Caribbean*. Authored by a team of international experts, it aims to offer a new direction in the study of East-Central European literature over the last two hundred

years. The project attempts to re-conceptualize literary traditions in the region by deconstructing national myths and focusing on common themes, thereby opening up perspectives which are routinely overlooked in traditional national literary histories. The four volumes of *History* approach literary traditions from five distinct angles: key political events; literary periods and genres; cities and regions; literary institutions; and real and imaginary figures.

The enterprise is reinforced by the editors' mission to provide foundations for the integration of the region's literary cultures into the European 'canon', a process which they see as compatible with that of European integration. They believe that this incorporation can only succeed if individual nations 'are willing and able to surrender some of their autonomy in exchange for a recognition of inner diversity as well as of an external commonwealth with the neighbours' (Vol. 1, p. xi). The authors' definition of East-Central Europe is more inclusive than the conventional interpretation, which associates the successor states of the Habsburg Empire and the lands of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth with this region. For the purpose of this series, East Central-Europe stretches from the Baltic countries in the north to the South Slavic countries and Albania in the south, and from the Czech Republic in the west to the Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova in the east.

Volume One of *History* comprises two parts, 'Nodes of political time' and 'Histories of literary form', which are introduced with an essay that addresses both the content and the chosen methodology. Inspired by the ground-breaking *A New History of French Literature* (1989, edited by Denis Hollister), in the first part of the volume the authors eschew the traditional totalizing and encyclopaedic narrative in favour of a series of essays which revolve around temporal nodes, with specific years representing watersheds in the history of the region. The absence of a teleological perspective enables the authors to reverse the chronological order. Therefore, the discussion of 'historical nodes' commences with 1989 and finishes with 1776, covering such crucial turning points as 1968, 1956, 1945, 1918 and 1848 in between. The second part of Volume One focuses on literary periods and genres, offering paradigmatic studies using a transnational approach, opting again for a non-totalizing perspective. It also addresses the transgressions between boundaries and the emergence of new genres like reportage and fictionalized autobiography and includes a subsection on opera and film.

Volume Two consists of three sections: 'Cities as sites of hybrid literary identity and multicultural production', 'Regional sites of cultural

hybridization', and 'The literary reconstruction of East-Central Europe's imagined communities: Native to Diasporic'. It discusses various topographic sites, in particular multicultural cities, multiethnic regions and border areas. The strength of this volume is that it gives equal weight to diverse cultural and national influences in relation to individual cities and regions in order to overcome the exclusivist perspective of individual national traditions. Such a variety is manifest in the multiple names of the cities discussed, such as Vilnius / Vilna / Wilno and Czernowitz / Cernăuți / Chernovtsy / Chernitvsti / Czerniowce. Regions that are covered include, beyond what would usually be expected, Transylvania and Macedonia. The forthcoming Volume Three and Volume Four will focus on literary institutions and the making of literary figures.

Apart from the novelty and sheer richness of material, along with the impressive expertise of its authors, another virtue of *History* is that literary cultures in the region are analysed on their own terms, rather than in a purely derivative way, as determined by their relationship to the mainstream European canon. By concentrating on regional socio-cultural developments, the usual pitfall of viewing cultural production in terms of 'progressiveness' or backwardness is avoided. However, the role of influences, transfers and interconnections within literary cultures (West as well as East) are somewhat understated, as are the connections between the literary cultures of the region itself. Given the intention to dissolve cultural and political divisions between East and West, perhaps more attention could have been paid to these interchanges. Occasionally, the methodological difficulties of applying notoriously vague 'Western concepts', such as Romanticism and Modernism, to histories of literature in East-Central Europe are hinted at, but not really fully engaged. The de-nationalization proves successful to an extent, especially in the truly comparative essays and in the sections that deal with the multifariousness and multiculturalism of regional cities, proving that appropriation by a single national culture is absurd. On the other hand, in some essays the various national contexts appear consecutively, without explicit comparison.

Some of the experimental frameworks may not be entirely appropriate; for example, the reversed chronology may be confusing for some readers. And given that this unique enterprise will serve as a definitive account for years to come, readers whose interest in the literary cultures of East-Central Europe increases whilst reading the volumes might have found it useful if the editors had indicated in the bibliography which of the cited works are available in English translation.

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These minor reservations aside, these volumes represent a significant and unique addition to the field. Never before have so numerous and so varied essays on the literary cultures of East-Central Europe been available in the English language. Given the ambitious scope and large number of contributors, some discontinuity is inevitable. Nevertheless, the richness of the material makes up for occasional unevenness, and such shortcomings do not spoil the fact that *History* is a trendsetter and launches a novel route into the subject, one which scholars will want to follow and explore in the future.

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