

Cornis-Pope, M. and Neubauer, J. (eds). *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Vol. 1. A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages, 19*. John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam and Philadelphia, PA, 2004. xx + 647 pp. Works cited. Index. €198.00: \$238.00.

How or even whether it is possible to present a literary history of East-Central Europe is a question with which the editors of this volume grapple. After all, we have to do here with literature written in some twenty languages, and over a geographical space stretching in a relatively narrow arc from the Mediterranean to the Baltic Sea. What is more, the task needs to be accomplished during a time of unprecedented geo-political upheaval when the entire concept of 'Eastern Europe' (invented, as Larry Wolff has shown so convincingly, in the eighteenth century and perpetuated until very recently by the divide between the so-called capitalist and Communist worlds) is up for grabs. And finally, this all needs to be done at a time when the standard models for writing literary history have been called into question by innovative works such as the *New History of French Literature* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), edited by Denis Hollier.

From the beginning, the book's editors insist that their literary history has a purpose beyond that of a normal scholarly book. It is written not so much to provide information about the literature and culture of the region (although it certainly provides much of that), as to force East-Central Europeans and other interested observers to recognize that transnational connections rather than separate national existences are and have always been the norm for this region. 'The primary inspiration for our project is thus an ethical imperative rather than an epistemological longing [. . .] A literary history of East-Central Europe will make sense if it furthers, on however small a scale, the communication between the peoples of the region' (pp. 15–16).

On the whole, the success of this volume is decidedly mixed. The most serious problem is that of methodology — the book does not have one but presents rather a grab bag of approaches ranging from very traditional to contemporary. Thus, the first section is organized, *à la* Hollier, into 'nodes of time', focusing in reverse chronological order on key dates in the region's history (1989, 1956/68, 1948, 1945, 1918, 1876/78/81, 1848, and 1776/89). Each section begins with an introduction meant to set the scene historically, and is generally followed by individual essays of varying lengths and quality on the situation in particular countries. For the most part, these essays make little or no attempt at transnational comparison, which is provided implicitly as a result of the heading under which they appear.

The nodal approach, however, is followed only for half of the volume. After this, we switch to a section called 'Histories of Literary Form'. This portion of the book considers in turn 'Shifting Periods and Trends', 'Shifting Genres', 'The Historical Novel', and 'Histories of Multimedia Constructions'. As with the nodal essays, some of these contributions (the best ones in my view) are themselves comparative. I would note particularly Guido Snel's article on fictionalized autobiography in East-Central Europe, Galin Tihanov's essay on the birth of modern literary theory in East-Central Europe, and Dina Jordanova's overview of East-Central European cinema and literary history.

But most of the essays are neither comparative nor particularly enlightening; rather, they focus on individual authors or literary movements in a traditional literary historical manner.

There is one other serious problem with this volume, and it concerns the role of Russian culture in the region. Following the lead of 'East-Central European' intellectuals, the volume's editors have almost completely excluded Russian literature from consideration. To be sure, it would be a serious error to view East-Central European literature through an exclusively Russian prism. That being said, it is hard to see how one could write such a history without taking into consideration the special role that Russian literary models played during, say, the modernist or Communist periods.

To be fair to the book's editors, I should note that this book, large as it is, is one of four projected for this series on East-Central Europe. Volume two is to focus on the shifting topographies of literary cultures, volume three to consider literary institutions, and volume four to examine the making of literary figures. I hope that the publisher will assign to future volumes a proofreader capable of catching the significant number of minor errors (mostly spelling of proper names) that litter this first one.

When complete, this series will be by far the most comprehensive treatment of East-Central European literary culture ever attempted. Although it is not recommended for light bedtime reading, and it may not provide a methodological model for future literary histories of other regions, it will serve as the standard library reference on the region's culture for years to come.

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