

“Our” Europe and its Literatures

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Review of *History of the Literary Cultures of East Central Europe* (Eds. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer); John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004.

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What are the conditions of possibility, the constraints, and the limits of literary histories today? Given the context of the close (re)integration of most East Central European countries into the EU, reintegration which will hopefully end the opposition between Eastern and Western Europe, what is the relevance of mapping the hybrid, multifaceted identity of literary cultures from this part of the world? These are just two of the questions addressed by the massive *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* (4 vols.), which is part of a vast comparative project regarding the literary histories of European countries, sponsored by the ICLA.

A well-tempered relativism: discourse on method

The answer to the first question can be partially found in Mario Valdes' Preface: in order to maintain its status within the paradigm change in the humanities, literary history has to go through a process of radical re-conceptualization, meant to find efficient modes of re-contextualizing literature within social reality. Such an approach follows the tradition of the School of Annals and has been practiced over the years by Michel Foucault and the New Historians. Its goal has been to overcome the "false objectivity" and the "neo-positivism" characterizing previous histories of literature, while capturing the latent discontinuities, the game between points of convergence and divergence, which alone can account for the diversity of literary objects.

Consequently, the authors of the present History prefer complementary micro-narratives to one overarching and comforting meta-narrative; yet their preference does not sacrifice the unity of the big project. A second consequence is that the outdated, privileged organic model is replaced by a rhizomatic/networked one. Well aware of the latest theoretical debates, the collective of authors (which includes four Romanian scholars: Monica Spiridon, Mircea Anghelescu, Letitia Guran and Alexandru Stefan) and the editors (Marcel Cornis Pope and John Neubauer) manage to resist the temptation of contemporary relativism. Knowing that the major premise of their approach--the "constructed" character of "East Central Europe" and its literatures--has both the advantage of precluding a facile "essentializing" analysis and the disadvantage of requiring a supplementary effort of theoretical legitimization, they take it as a challenge. In the absence of a universal system of reference, against which one could assess "the facts" and the validity of interpretation, the authors make recourse to wide historical contextualization. The plurality of interpretations does not contravene to the main goal of

this History, which is that of establishing a dialogue among cultures rather than of generating intellectual consensus.

The perspectivist-relational mode of interpretation which characterizes all the analyses in this History is visible both in the general contextualization of the texts and in the choice of interpretive methods. The option for a regional literary and cultural history, as a complement to the national ones, is determined by a double imperative: an epistemologic one, which seeks to contribute to the configuration of a common, though not homogeneous East European identity, and an ethic one—intended to encourage political and cultural communication among peoples and individuals belonging to the same broad imaginary community. Moreover, such an option is informed by the awareness that the fundamental mechanism of identity construction is the way we relate to “the Other.”

In order to answer the specific constraints of a transnational study and the innate diversity of its object of analysis, the solutions adopted by the book are, first, the creation of a wide collective of authors, whose specific competence will ensure an accurate representation of each of the national literatures included but also the necessary comparative perspective. Secondly, the selection of the material was made so that all literary texts could benefit from the advantages of a wide, cultural perspective, while also maintaining their specificity. Thus the interpretive model is flexible enough to accommodate elements of a wide variety, while avoiding a pompous encyclopedic style in favor of hybrid and multilingual analyses.

Nodes and interstices

One of the most important innovations of this History is the concept of “node.” Intended as an alternative to the traditional notion of literary influence and organic metaphors, this concept emphasizes the idea of cultural transfer, representing, according to the editors, “the launching point of various derivations” and the “convergence point of many directions of development within the network.” On the one hand, the choice of such a concept is required by the necessity of building a dynamic interpretive model; on the other, it is motivated by its capacity to suggest “the liminal” condition of East Central European cultures.

By avoiding the placement of events in a strictly causal relationship, the authors create the premises for establishing alternative traditions, which could lead to a well-informed understanding of the multiple facets of the same phenomenon. In each of the five parts of the history (the first two included in the first volume, the other three taking one volume each) the concept of “node” has a specific meaning. In the first part (Nodes of Political Time) the material is organized according to historically, politically, and culturally significant dates for the region; 1989, 1956/1968, 1948, 1945, 1918, 1867/1878/1881, 1848, 1776/1789. This option leads to chronological segmentation, which in its turn draws attention to the process of reflection-refraction taking place between history and literature in the creation of literary histories. The emphasis is placed on the discontinuity of historical time, which, thus fragmented allows multiple, distinct mappings (according to J. Hillis Miller’s theory). This “game with the past” (Lucian Boia) is a way of

acknowledging the provisory, variable and re-inscribable profile of each historical construct. The advantage of such a reading is that it offers a palimpsestic image of the most recent two centuries in East Central European history—which allows the construction of a more complex network of relationships among these various national traditions. In this manner, authors are better able to identify various confluences, contaminations, and gaps of these national traditions.

The choice of dates, significant for the histories of the region, rather than for their literatures is in no way a sign of privileging a historical criterion over an aesthetic one. Instead, it points to the political pressures to which literatures of the area were subjected. The presentation of temporal nodes in reverse chronological order is a consequence both of the critical reevaluation of the past from the perspective of the present and of the intention to provide a representation focussed on trans-national relations. The result is a plurality of coexisting moments, “a relative synchronicity” (Maria Todorova) within which 1956 Hungary is contemporary with 1968 Czechoslovakia, and 1830 Poland with 1848 Romania. The studies of Marcel Cornis Pope, Wladimir Bolecki, Epp Annus and Robert Hugh, Monica Spiridon, and Peter Krasztev on the literary context of Poland, Estonia and Romania in 1989, and those of Renata Kirin, Alexander Kiossev, Letitia Guran, and Alexandru Stefan about the echoes of the first years of communist dictatorship allow not only the identification of certain political and temporal gaps among various countries, but also the coexistence of various competing traditions and cultural models.

Worlds in motion

In the second part of this first volume (*History of the Literary Forms*), the concept of “node” is applied to other traditional categories of literary history: genres, currents, periods. According to John Neubauer, their employment in mapping East Central European literatures has been made difficult not only by the natural accumulation of meanings and rewritings, but also by the conceptual metamorphoses intervening in the processes of cultural transfer. As demonstrated by Roman Koropeckyi’s study of the coexistence of Classicism and Romanticism in Polish literature and by Peter Krasztev’s essay about East Central European modernism, such concepts are quite different from their Western counterparts. The same shiftiness of categories is visible in the amalgamation of traditional genres characterizing literatures from this area. The epic poem, the short story, the autobiography and the reportage are many times rewritten in versions bearing clear regional characteristics.

Like in the first part, special attention is given to borderline phenomena, hybrid creations which transgress the frontier between currents and genres, and also to heterogeneous moments. Apart from the three main moments, discernible in the development of most East Central European literatures (the national awakening, modernity, and communism) there are many cases of revival and coexistence of various directions, which contradict the initial coherent and homogeneous periodization.

The present study of “moving worlds” will be continued in the next volumes with a comparative analysis of nodal topographies, institutions and personalities from East-Central Europe. Overall, the first volume implicitly claims that the long-term exercise in diversity and the scar-marked profile of their history -- are what these cultures contribute to the common European identity project.