

# Foreword

The novel *The Devil's Workshop*, by Czech author Jáchym Topol, contains a passage wherein a Swedish girl of Slovak origin tries to find the place where the East begins. When she asks people in Prague, they suggest going to Bratislava, where people tell her to go to Budapest. She encounters the same suggestion from the local inhabitants, telling her to go further east. Finally, the girl reaches the Japan Sea and realizes that the beginning of the “East” does not exist.

This episode clearly illustrates the insubstantiality of what we call the “East.” Perception of space, when processed through the human body, is related to matters of one’s own memory and to questions of identity. Regardless, we know that the “West” has had overabundant connotations, thanks to the dominant role of Western nations in the writing of history. Therefore, it seems that there are still valid reasons to focus on the “East.”

Since the fall of the Berlin Wall, approaches to East European literature have diversified into topics of gender studies, postcolonial studies, etc. It seems, however, that most of the discussions occur within the “national literature” framework. The expression “East European literature” has been replaced by “East-Central European literature” or “literature in post-Communist countries,” as if the concept of “East European literature” has suddenly vanished. Of course, new disciplines and approaches require new terminology. However, we prefer to stick with the expression “East” not only because the focus countries share a common history and experience of the Communist era but also to further develop the connotations of this word. In this context, our research has sought to highlight three perspectives that go beyond the framework of national literature: (1) journey and migration in literature; (2) rewriting literary history; and (3) literature of micro-nations. These perspectives will be minutely discussed in the second part of this book.

The papers compiled in this volume were primarily presented at the symposium organized by our research groups. It is also a great pleasure to share, within these pages, unpublished texts by contemporary authors who contributed to this volume at our request. These valuable

contributions appear in the first part of the book, “Voices of Writers.” The paper by Czech author Michal Ajvaz was originally prepared as a keynote speech for a JSPS International Scientific Meeting, on the theme “World Literature and Japanese Literature in the Era of Globalization,” held on March 3 and 4, 2013, at the University of Tokyo. Ajvaz describes the potential world literature at the beginning of the third millennium. Polish author Olga Tokarczuk presented her paper, at a conference held on March 1, 2013, at Rikkyo University in Tokyo (supported by Comprehensive Studies on Slavic-Eurasia: Collaborative Research Project, Slavic Eurasian Center at Hokkaido University, 2012, Project Leader: Hikaru Ogura). She provides us with a new perspective on Central European literature and its continuity. Natasza Goerke, another Polish author who resides in Germany and Nepal, read her text at the opening session of the symposium mentioned below. Her writing is already an example of transborderness, which needs to be contextualized beyond national literature.

Most of the papers included in the second part were presented at the international symposium “Images of East European Literature: The Variable and Invariable in the Past and Present” held on September 29, 2014 at Rikkyo University, or at other events organized under the research project “Studies on Images of ‘East’ in East European Literature” (Project Leader: Kenichi Abe, JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B), Grant Number 24320064).

It is a great honor to have, as part of this volume, an informative paper about the Kashubian language by late Jerzy Treder, who was also one of the foreign co-investigators of our research group.

After three years of research and attending an international symposium and several seminars with international guests, we have concluded that the perspectives presented in this volume are of significant value and merit further consideration for the contextualization of these literatures. They provide us with constructive viewpoints that act as an intermediary between world literature and national or regional literature.

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am grateful to Go Koshino for his support and Mika Osuga, who edited the book with great efficiency.

I hope this book will find readers in many countries and invite them to become a part of our discussion.

Prague, July 2015  
Kenichi Abe