

# **Some Remarks on Contemporary East European Literature**

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## **1. Reconsidering “East Europe” as a Median Context**

More than a quarter of a century has passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The division of Europe suddenly appeared to be over; the resultant halves all at once reunited as one continent. Many people anticipated that EU enlargement on May 1, 2004 meant that Eastern Europe was finally on the road of becoming European by no longer being communist. Simultaneously, discussions on the terminology for the eastern part of Europe repeatedly emerged, referring to “Central Europe,” “Eastern Europe,” “East-Central Europe,” or other terms. Each term implied different borders and held different connotations. Despite the shared experience of communism, “Eastern Europe” has never been a monolith. However, the literatures of Eastern Europe from 1945 to the end of the 1990s were undeniably bound with the political history of the region, as we observe in the literary responses to those experiences. In this study, I use the term “East European literature” in a broader sense to mean the literatures of post-communist states in Europe. However, I have no intention to present an exhaustive mapping of the literature, which is beyond our scope. Instead, I aim to examine some typical features that can be observed in a contemporary East European literature to examine further possibilities of this study.

Before determining the main subject, I would like to examine some basic contexts underlying East European studies. Only recently, so called “Eastern Europe” has been discussed as a colonial terrain of the Western

tradition (for example, in Larry Wolff's book *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994)). The geographical border between Europe and Asia was not unanimously fixed in the eighteenth century; it was sometimes located at the Don, sometimes farther east at the Volga, and sometimes, as it is today, at the Urals, so Eastern Europe was sometimes excluded from Europe.

Such uncertainty encouraged the construction of Eastern Europe as a paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, Europe but not Europe. Eastern Europe defined Western Europe by contrast, as the Orient defined the Occident, but was also made to mediate between Europe and the Orient. One might describe the invention of Eastern Europe as an intellectual project of demi-Orientalization.<sup>1</sup>

Needless to say, Wolff's discourse serves as an extension of Edward Said's *Orientalism*. Said analyzes the discursive fields of scholarship, art, and politics in which the "orient" is projected as the "other" to the European. By reading against the grain of the writers' intentions, he shows how European men of reason and benevolence could inscribe a rationale for oppression and exploitation within their very discourse of the Enlightenment. Wolff analyzed the image of East, especially from the discourses in the eighteenth century Enlightenment, but his thesis would be still valid for the contemporary situation. Because the contrast between West and East is increasingly prominent in the discourse on EU enlargement, as Nataša Kovačević has noted, the asymmetrical relation between the West and the East, which is obliged, plays a role of catching up with the ever-elusive Western prosperity and civilization to satisfy the EU, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Bank criteria for achieving democracy, privatization, capitalism, diversity, and human rights protection. This is a necessary step to become emancipated as European.

It is appropriate here to recall that this impossibility of dialogue, unidirectional flow of directives and their acceptance as necessary for

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), p. 7.

emancipation from economic or cultural “inferiority” typically defines a colonial, or a proto-colonial relationship.<sup>2</sup>

Politics have no impact on these discourses; the environments surrounding cultures and literatures are the same, as we observe in the many examples of “irreparable inequality” (Milan Kundera). In this context, we can see many literary attempts to relativize the position of Europe, through decentralization—in other words, through orientation toward the “East.”

However, the inner European issue (West-East) is not the only measure to be considered. Another perspective is inevitable for us: a global one. Since globalism is a key issue in economics and politics, we must closely consider its relationship with world literature. Despite the growing interest in world literature beyond the national canon, the nations of post-socialist Europe remain a blind spot for Western literary criticism. Needless to say, we should avoid addressing East European literature too hastily in the context of world literature. Milan Kundera’s suggestion would be helpful for further understanding post-communist literature. It is quite known that Kundera brought widespread critical attention to the term “Central Europe” with his essay *A Kidnapped West: The Tragedy of Central Europe* (1984). In *The Curtain* (2005), he gave a definite definition to the term by referring to the “median context” that lies between the large context of the world and the small context of the nations. Here, Kundera argues on the term “median context” to avoid the term “East.” However, when he mentions the common features of central Europe by referring to the “reason of similar experience” and “common historical situations that brought them together, at different times, in different configurations, and within shifting, never definitive, borders,”<sup>3</sup> the concept of “median context” could also apply to “East Europe,” which has experienced a similar experience of communism and post-communism. The median criterion provides us a bird’s-eye view and clarifies common

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2 Nataša Kovačević, *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe’s Borderline Civilization* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 1–2.

3 Milan Kundera, *The Curtain*. Translated by Linda Asher (New York: Harper Perennial, 2007), p. 46.

problems. This is why we anticipate the possibility of East European literature. Here, I aim to examine how contemporary literary works in East Europe relate to the median and national contexts.

## 2. Inside a National Literature

In East-Central Europe, vernacular literature and national philology were major forces in shaping the emerging modern nations.<sup>4</sup> Especially the question of canon, literary canon, and literary history were crucial for educating and forming national identities. “Institutionalizing literature was a matter of national self-consciousness rather than of economics.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore discussions of the national literary canon and national literary history have been highly valued. From the Enlightenment to the socialist period, significant attention was paid to national literary history, which also served as a central institution for literature, especially as a reference item for national identity.

However, currently, literature and literary scholarship no longer have the social impact they possessed in the nineteenth century, although they still continue to shape conceptions of national identity through their institutionalized narratives about their national past. Hence, it “is the task of the twenty-first century to retell those nineteenth-century narratives from different perspectives.”<sup>6</sup>

Examining the cultural and political questions of East-Central Europe, Jan Neubauer raises the following question: “...whether it can overcome its cultural provincialism, whether, after its various national awakenings, it can regain in some new form the cultural and literary

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4 John Neubauer, “General Introduction,” in Marcel Cornis-Pope, John Neubauer, eds., *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries. Vol. III: The Making and Re-making of Literary Institutions* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Pub., 2007), p. 3.

5 Ibid., p. 4.

6 John Neubauer, “Introduction to the Part IV. Literary Histories: Itineraries of National Self-Images,” in *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, p. 355.

diversity it once possessed—a diversity of which its past literature still offers some evidence.”<sup>7</sup>

Here, we could pose a question from a different perspective: What is the scope of a national literature? Take the case of **Libuše Moniková** (1945–1998), who was born in Prague and wrote exclusively in German, even though her stories occurred in a Czech environment. Her novels *Pavane für eine verstorbene Infantin* (1983) and *Treibeis* (1992) feature expatriate Czechs as their protagonists, and both draw on Czech history and historical figures. In the communist era, she was simply regarded as a writer in exile. However, other approaches to bilingual writers are required for future study.

**Herta Müller** (1953) would be another example. To analyze her works, we can assume several angles: language (German), region (Banat), and state (Romania/Germany). In Germany, there is a debate on the definition of literature by migrants and minority speakers of German, with now disputed terms such as *Gastarbeitliteratur*, *Ausländerliteratur*, and *MigrantInnenliteratur* betraying the sociological emphasis of many early approaches to the texts. These texts have tended to be viewed as social documents and examined for what they can say about life in another country or frequently about the situation of minority German speakers, migrants, or foreigners in Germany.

These discussions show us that the categorization or the naming of literature of displaced persons still poses problems. This concerns not only national literature but also national identity. What is needed is a recognition of difference that also contributes to the breaking down and decentering of the hierarchical hegemonic values.

Paradoxically, another question of reception arises here, especially in the context of world literature. Undoubtedly, the literature and critics of Western Europe formed a sort of literary canon that influenced other national and regional literatures. As Franco Moretti points out, the encounter of western forms and local reality did indeed produce a different structural compromise everywhere. Hence, what matters here is a mere triangle of “foreign form,” “local material,” and “local form.”<sup>8</sup>

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7 Ibid., p. 3.

8 Franco Moretti, “Conjectures on World Literature,” in *New Left Review* 1, January-February 2000, pp. 54–68.

Extending this discourse, the task of literary historians could be seen as an enumeration of samples. However, it could be possible to situate a third level, i.e., the median context. In post-communist countries, we observe some common tendencies in literature reflecting their common experiences and their common actual problems. Thus, it would be quite useful roughly identify some common features of Eastern European literature of the past two decades.

### 3. Journey, Migrations, and Literature

After the decline of communism, especially after the Schengen Agreement, it seemed that exile no longer existed on a juridical level. This, however, did not mean the end of migration in a broader sense. More precisely, the people of Eastern Europe are now enjoying the right to free movement and to select their own places of residence. This radical change in domestic and international politics has also brought diversity to cultural and literary fields. Movement, displacement, and journey became a new topic of the literary scene. Many stories set beyond national borders describe encounters with the other, especially with the West or with non-European cultures. However, I would like to stay focused on the movement to the East.

The Polish writer, **Andrzej Stasiuk** (1960), embodies the real mapping of East Europe through his travels all over Europe. Here, we will never find memorable cities such as Prague, Budapest, Bratislava, and Bucharest, etc., but lesser-known towns and villages in Poland, Slovakia, Hungary, Romania, Montenegro, Serbia, and Albania. He tries to focus on unknown places and peoples in order to map another side of Europe. Like Jack Kerouac, Andrzej Stasiuk drives for the sake of driving, stops at small isolated towns, and writes fugacious impressions, creating, as he put it, a Slavic *On the Road*.<sup>9</sup> However, while Kerouac and his friends travel west to see his country, Stasiuk always heads toward the East. At first, it seems like a journey in search of the peculiarities of the East, enumerating the appearances or gestures of inhabitants, landscapes, and

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9 Andrzej Stasiuk, *Fado*. Translated by Bill Johnston (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009), p. 5.

so on. However, his internal voice, inserted sometimes into the text as a narrator, appeals to the reader.

Yes, everyone should come here. At least those who make use of the name *Europe*. It should be an initiation ceremony, because Albania is the unconscious of the continent. Yes, the European id, the fear that at night haunts slumbering Paris, London, and Frankfurt am Main. Albania is the dark well into which those who believe that everything has been settled once and for all should peer.<sup>10</sup>

It gradually emerges that the journey is accompanied by a one-sided dialog with the West, a dialog without a listener; thus, a dialogue with himself: “After all, no one expected *you* to be the ones who would change; rather, it was us who would have to repeat your gestures, your victories, and your mistakes.”<sup>11</sup> The addressed person “you” does not listen to his story, nor does he even reveal an interest in it. This perspective could be considered an appeal to those in the West, and also the East, who have not really tried to see that the former East Europe and the literature of the East have not only esthetic value for its nation but can also enlighten the West; additionally, this perspective give birth to the possibility of decentralization beyond the context of a national literature. “Our continental mission may well be the deformation of your achievement, their disintegration—a grotesque transformation and a parody of them that will serve to extend their life.”<sup>12</sup>

**Olga Tokarczuk** (1962), another Polish writer, also tells us numerous stories about moving. *Bieguni* (Runners) is a good example of a 21st century travelogue. The book’s title is taken from the name of an old Orthodox sect in Russia that believed that staying put made one vulnerable to attacks by Evil, while continuous moving helped redeem the soul. *Bieguni* is a book about modern people who are obliged to move from one place to another.

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10 Andrzej Stasiuk “*On the Road to Babadag. Travels in the Other Europe.*” Transl. by Michael Kandel (Boston-New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011), p. 93

11 Ibid., p. 62.

12 Ibid., p. 73.

These writings were not travelogues with exotic interests but focused on the ordinary lives of ordinary people with peculiar points of view. Here, we cannot expect an astonishing encounter with the tiny people of Lilliput, as in *Gulliver's Travels* or postcolonial descriptions of Friday as in *Robinson Crusoe*. Stasiuk, Tokarczuk, and others illustrate encounters in their books, but most of these are everyday encounters in ordinary lives. What fascinates us about these ordinary episodes is their ordinariness: We know very little about it because we do not care about the ordinary daily life of ordinary people in unknown places. However, moving is always accompanied by an encounter with "others," which also provides other possibilities for one to get to know oneself.

There is another common feature in these two travelogues: fragmentary description. Stasiuk and Tokarczuk accumulate pieces of memory, episodes, and thoughts, but they do not dare summarize or give them any decisive form. They just simply type and write, and allow readers to think for themselves. As Dorota Kołodziejczyk wrote, "[Stasiuk's] stories will not make up a novel, which is, after all, an arch-European genre, but a digressive travelogue with only loose ends and history fading out into myth."<sup>13</sup>

#### 4. History in Collage

As we observe many examples in postmodern literature, the celebration of fragmentation is not quite a new phenomenon. Rather, it is becoming an increasingly common way of writing. This cubistic, fragmental writing obliges readers to be conscious of constructing its history from these fragments. This also reflects a typical attitude in this globalized, flattened world.

Thus, it is quite symbolic that **Patrik Ouředník** wrote the book *Europeana: A brief History of Twentieth Century* at the beginning of the new millennium in a style of a collage. As its subtitles indicate, the book deals with history. However, his writing reminds us of an enumeration of

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13 Dorota Kołodziejczyk, "The Slavic on the road—Eastern European Negative Nativism in Andrzej Stasiuk's Travelogues," in *Kultura—Historia—Globalizacja*, 2010, Nr. 7, p. 107.



a dictionary; Ouředník debuted with the book *The Šmirbuch of the Czech Language: A Dictionary of Unconventional Czech* in 1988. In *Europeana*, there are no central figures, but we can read only an enumeration of various facts from the invention of brasseries to the episode of the holocaust. As Ouředník distorts the axis of time and the traditional methods of historiography in passages such as the following, we realize the radicalness of his writing:

The breakdown of the electronic system that experts warned citizens about was called the MILLENIUM BUG, and it could have occurred at midnight on December 31st, 1999, when the date changed to 1.1.00, because most computer applications used a two-figure year code and the danger was that the electronic systems would identify the year 2000 as the year 1900, as if the twentieth century and the assassination of the Austrian archduke had never happened.<sup>14</sup>

The unknown narrator binds non-relational episodes together, gives them new meaning, and obliges readers not only to read and understand the text but also to try to understand their own views on history. Cubist paintings were characterized by their fragmentation of objects, which also led to the disappearance of the vanishing point and thus, to the emergence of a world with no center nor periphery. Ouředník's *Europeana* is also written without central figures or a narrator; the text has neither a center nor a periphery. It thus relies on readers to reconstruct history from a mound of fragmented episodes.

It is quite interesting that Stasiuk also noted the following from a completely different perspective: "From the civilization of the West, they've been taken only remnants and its trash. Because remnants and trash happen to be what's most available. The primitive, vulgar offerings of pop culture encounter a particular sort of vacuum here in the east of Europe. Here, history uprooted entire nations and generations."<sup>15</sup>

The end of the grand narrative also meant the emergence of small narratives in an unaccountable mass. Writers in Eastern Europe are also

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14 Patrik Ouředník, *Europeana: A Brief History of the Twentieth Century*. Transl. by Gerard Turner (Champaign: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), p. 12.

15 *Fado*, pp. 85–86.

trying to focus on small narratives. Tokarczuk also digs deeply into one place: *Dom dzienny, dom nocny* (House of Day, House of Night) is a collection of stories, the most of them take place in a small village in the west of Poland. In no particular order, she pieces together the stories of the local community and the wider history that informs them. Some people compare her writing to a mushroom's growth, because she mainly turns her attention to gradual change in minute details:

[...] then words and things do form a symbiotic relationship, like mushrooms and birch trees. Words grow on things, and only then are they ripe in meaning, ready to be spoken aloud. Only then can you play with them like a ripe apple, sniff them, taste them, and lick their surface before snapping them in half and inspecting their bashful, succulent insides.

People are like words in this way too—they cannot live without being attached to a place, because only then do they become real.

Maybe this is what Marta meant when she said something that struck me as odd at the time: “If you find your place you’ll be immortal.”<sup>16</sup>

Her perspective reminds us of that of Bohumil Hrabal, “the little pearl at the bottom,” where the Czech author tries to shine a light to the trivial matters of daily life. It may seem that Tokarczuk shows us merely random small episodes; however, the accumulation of such episodes will have meaning if these episodes combine. They will become a story, which will never be replaced by something else.

## 5. Literature of Micro-Nations

If we can observe a tendency toward small narratives, we must simultaneously also make note of non-national literatures. The last decades have been marked by an increase in academic interest in the study of small political entities. Yet, despite countless publications, there is still no agreed upon or satisfactory definition of what constitutes small size in the politico-economic context. The situation is particularly problematic when it comes to the study of the smallest of polities, the microstates.

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16 Olga Tokarczuk, *House of Day, House of Night*. Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones. (London: Granta Books, 2002), pp. 176–177.

The following is a passage from Stasiuk's *Fado*:

Albanians, Belarusians, Bosnians, Bulgarians, Croats, Czechs, Estonians, Hungarians, Latvians, Lithuanians, Macedonians, Moldavians, Montenegrins, Poles, Romanians, Serbs, Slovaks, Slovenes, and Ukrainians—this is more or less how you can describe the map of the territories inhabited by two hundred million new Europeans. To ensure the task isn't too easy, let's add to this "zone of mixed populations"—as Hannah Arendt called the mutable and amorphous expanses lost somewhere between Germany and Russia—the colonies of those very Germans and Russians scattered here and there; let's also add, say, the Gagauz and the Aromuns, let's add the restless and international Gypsies, the Tatars of the Crimea, and the Turks who failed to return to their unexpectedly diminished homeland on the Bosphorus in time.

Yes indeed, two hundred million new Europeans is a real challenge. It ought to drive the sleep from people's eyes and fill them with anxiety and joy, because what will happen next will resemble the discovery of an entirely new continent.<sup>17</sup>

With the emerging "new" Europe, the study of Eastern European literature would extend its scope not only to national literatures, but also to micro-national literatures. Here, I would like to define micro-national literature very roughly: non-nationalized literature, whose language is not the official language of its state.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, every literature, irrespective of the population of its culture of origin or status in world literature, has its own accumulation of works and critics, so considering the

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<sup>17</sup> *Fado*, p. 74.

<sup>18</sup> Here we shouldn't confound with the notion of Minor Literature proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. According to them, a minor literature is "a literature of immigrants, of nomads for whom it is both impossible to write in a major language—also the language that establishes a national "great literature"—and impossible to write otherwise" It is enough to remind Franz Kafka who wrote in German among the Czech citizen in a isolated German enclave in Prague. At first sight, it seems that most of micro-nation face the similar situation as Kafka's. However, Deleuze and Guattari never tried a sociological analysis on minority, their work focus on the writer Franz Kafka; it is enough to remind that the title of book is "*Kafka: pour une littérature mineure*," not "*Pour une littérature mineure*."

mutual relationship between national and micro-national literatures is an inevitable next step.

Because central European literature is constituted from dozens of national literatures, every national literature also has its inter-relational, neighboring literatures. An example of this interrelation that I would like to mention is the first novel by Czech author Martin Šmauš: *Děvčátko, rozdělej ohniček* [Girl, Make a Little Fire] (2005). This is a story about a gipsy boy, Andrej Dunka, who was born in the gipsy plantation of Poljana, then travels all over Moravian and Czech lands, experiencing various “assimilation institutions” such as first love. The uniqueness of the book is that the protagonist Andrej is not a represented object, as we find in some one-sided images in many works of non-Romani authors, but he himself is the subject of the story: The well-detailed description and use of many Romani expressions demonstrate a sincere interest in the object. While written in Czech, the book became a common property of both Czech and Romani literature, and, needless to say, also of Central-Eastern European literature.

## 6. Conclusion

I agree completely with John Neubauer’s view that “[w]e hope that at some point in the future, the national adjectives (Czech, Romanian, Polish etc.) will refer to geographical areas rather than to specific languages, so that national literary histories would cease to be monolingual.”<sup>19</sup>

To avoid repeating exclusion by written language or place of birth, literary research will have to proceed in a broader context. However, it is not realistic to address every literary work on the same level. For example, in world literature, this would entail a never-ending list of titles and authors. Thus, for this context, some constructive frame of reference would be indispensable, and for this reason, Central/Eastern European literature as a median context still serves as a possible criteria for further research on comparative and contrastive studies. Simultaneously, a flexible attitude will be increasingly necessary to move past fixed contexts such as national, micro-national, or regional: Since all of us have several identities, every literary work can be contextualized in several discourses.

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19 Neubauer, p. 346.