

Central Europe in Literary Studies

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ABSTRACT

The paper offers a delineation of Central Europe from the viewpoint of literary studies. Central Europe as a cultural and geographic space or a crossroad between East and West is characterized by the changing position of unstable centres and peripheries, and by a fusion of ethnic groups, cultures and religions. The territorial principle of mutual “contacts” led to an intense communication and exchange of literary values, to understanding, but also to encounters of artistic traditions and poetics, norms and conventions. The metonymic motivation of this communication, which results rather from “neighbouring” contacts than from the genetic relation among the languages, gave rise not only to the process of interculturality but also postulated the myth of cultural unity (for example, that of Western culture). While minimalist concepts work with binary oppositions (we and them, ours and theirs, centre and periphery, etc.), which characterize this space as a specific region of small Slavonic and non-Slavonic nations between Germany and Russia, the maximalist concepts sees Central Europe mostly from the axiological point of view as a set of historically developed ideas related to the tradition of Latin Christianity. From the viewpoint of literary studies, the question is whether one observes its ideologemes on the level of genre, poetics and style, i.e. in the very literary structures. Some literary scholar contend that we can decipher the Central Europeanness of the interpoeticity of artefacts (as certain timeless cultural models and constants) in the Central European variant of the grotesque, the irony, the satire, the cabaret or the post-modern prose. The paper also summarizes the views of literary theorists on the phenomenon of Central Europe.

Comparative Literature. Central Europe. Cultural Anthropology. Literary History. Literary Geography. Czech and Slovak Comparative Literature

In the last two decades the theme of “Central Europe” has become subject of revived interpretations carried out mostly on the level of intellectual discourse that has nostalgically evoked the multicultural perspective of the Habsburg monarchy of the end of the 19th century (see Pospíšil; Czaplejewicz and Kasperski; Janaszek-Ivaničková and Fokkema; Glass and Serloth; Pospíšil and Zelenka). The complexity of terminology and semantics connected with the study of Central Europe has provoked a lot of

bibliographical items, an impossible to overlook amount of studies and texts in which it is difficult to find one's way or look for interdisciplinary linkages. Central Europe was undergoing a real change in time and space, horizontally as well as vertically. The concept would be differently defined and defended by politicians, economists, geographers, historians, or theoreticians of art; there would be difficulties in agreement between philologists and musicologists or architects in the question of generally valid features of the ideologemes of Central-Europeanism, concerning the beginning and the end of their borders, and whether in scientific discourse the problem can be posited in this way at all. The Slovenian literary theorist Janko Kos speaks about basic differences in the understanding of the concept in literary studies, culture, history and politics, which usually does not correspond with the geographical definition of Central Europe (Kos 11-26). In spite of these limits the phenomenon of Central Europe, which is mostly manifested ideologically and politically and, at the same time, often transcends these borders towards culture and art, as well as sociology, philosophy, semiotics and related sciences, remains a fascinating intellectual construct attesting to ourselves, to the sources of our identity, and to the roots of European civilisation. Central Europe as a cultural and geographical area, or a crossroads between the West and the East, has always been characteristic of its changing position of unstable centres and peripheries, specific overlapping of ethnoses, cultures and religions. The territorial principle of mutual "contiguity" has led to a more intensive way of communication and exchange of literary values, to a deeper understanding, as well as, however, to clashes and conflicts of artistic traditions and poetics, norms and conventions (see Zelenka 59-79). The metonymical motivation of this communication, which results rather from the "neighbourly" contact than from the genetic proximity of languages, may evoke not only the process of interculturality (E. Miner), resulting from an open horizon of expected reception (H. R. Jauss), but also the effort to postulate and codify the myth of literary unity of various wholes and systems, most often of Western Europe and its Greek-Latin civilizational origin. The hegemonic and universalist character of this paradigm, drawing on the idea of "great", "developed", "influencing" national literatures, was strengthened by historiographic models of the last two centuries that through their "ethnocentric ideology" induced the myth of western European literary unity and their common basis, not taking into account the value "otherness" of the so-called peripheral literatures and their different roots (see Sinopoli).

Reshaping the schemes of traditional comparative studies, the Slovak literary theorist Dionýz Ďurišin uses geography and geopolitics to achieve a deeper understanding of the European interliterary process, that is, of the Central European literary area as well. Analysing key categories of interliterary communities (the specific and the standard) and interliterary centrism, he arrives at formulating the principles of the theory of interliterariness as well as at understanding of the concept of world (universal) literature.

Even though the forming of Central Europe, with its multi-ethnicity, complexity and interpenetration of state constitutional and administrative, denominational and cultural aspects, with its generally natural, historically originated structural hetero-

geneity, was genetically derived from the concept of national literature and national philologies, it was, at the same time, logically heading towards its supranational “Central-Europeanism”, to the formation of regional identity transcending the borders of one homeland or a concrete state. Central Europe de facto in microcosm demonstrates the conflict of two conceptions of Europe: the Europe of national homelands and the Europe of regions. Intercultural comparative studies thus deal with and compares literary production of geographical regions that are also considered literary or cultural areas and that are not bound to linguistic and ethnic barriers and political borders of individual states.

Reflections on Central Europe in the form of circulating ideas are mostly intellectual constructions expressing political interests of elites and power structures, and often, as fictions and modern myths, are subject to purpose manipulations. But literature, or verbal texts with artistic aspirations (ambitions), as the Polish Slavonic studies scholar Adam F. Kola has pointed out, occupies a privileged position in this discourse through its reception efficiency: if the category of Europe, assuming that Central Europe may be considered its natural geopolitical centre and the “heart” of this complicated organism, is a hypothetical pre-text to the diagnosing of current European culture, then literature acts as its “natural meta-language” (12).¹

In Poland, as a result of different cultural and historical development, Central Europe conceptually merged with such other terms as Central-Eastern Europe, or Eastern Europe (O. Halecki, P. Wandycz, etc.), Euroasia, Intermarum (a region between the Baltic Sea and the Adriatic Sea), which resulted from direct geographical neighbourhood with Russia, or the Ukraine, and from the existence of the Rzeczpospolita (see Halecki; Wandycz.). In the Polish context, conceptions of Central Europe were modified by the idea of the medieval Polish state in which, alongside the dominating Poles, lived the Ukrainians, Belarusians and Lithuanians – in a peaceful symbiosis and symbolical protection from Russia, which was understood already as part of the “barbarian” Asia. At the same time, there was nostalgia for the mythical Sarmatian Poland as well as the influence of Christian Catholicism: the messianistic conviction about the election of the Polish nation, which had received a task from God to protect the civilizational values of the Christian West against the backward East. This is the source of the motif of borders and the “Christian wall” (*antemurale christianis*), which was strongly highlighted e.g. in Polish Baroque literature. Even H. Sienkiewicz by the end of the 19th century had popularized the federal organization of the central-eastern states (Poland, Ukraine, Belarus, and Lithuania) under Polish leadership. Polish historians, like S. Wandycz or J. Kłoczowski, operate on several intensity levels with the concept of Central-Eastern Europe, by which they understand the countries situated between the Adriatic and Baltic Sea, which as early as in the 10th–11th centuries were in the sphere of Christian western (Latin) civilization; this area overlaps with the Czech, Polish as well as Hungarian monarchies, which became consolidated by the end of the 20th century and had become dominant regions in medieval Central Europe. Thus in the Polish tradition Central-Eastern Europe denotes a geopolitical area between Germany and Russia that is culturally part of Western Europe and contradicts the values of Euro-Asian Russia; it is, in fact, an area of Central

Europe, but shifted more towards the East. With regard to the Polish understanding of Central Europe, the Polish literary critic E. Czaplewicz refers to the myth of the Kresy, a specific region on the Polish-Ukrainian borders. Czaplewicz points to multiculturalism, a multiethnic nature, as well as the religious tolerance of a region that is a synecdoche of Europe and, on the other hand, a symbolic representation of Polish-Ukrainian history, which was often full of war and social and religious persecution carried out by both sides (Czaplewicz 41-50; Czaplewicz and Kasperski, *Kresy w literaturze*).

In Hungary, or, in other words, in the historical Lower Hungary, the idea of Central Europe managed to preserve its constant popularity and was strongly frequented in artistic as well as critical literature: the linguistically isolated position of the Ugro-Finnish Hungarian language in the middle of a Slavic-German ethnicity led to an intensive study of cultural exclusivity, and through this, to the understanding of a “mediatory mission” in the Central-European area. There was especially the influence of the idea of a Greater Hungary, including Slovakia as well, which was supposed to serve as an example of different nationalities within the Hungarian state with borders from before 1918. Even though in Hungarian fiction one can find an idealized picture of the Habsburg Monarchy, especially after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867, and a strong conviction that the year 1918 and the following Versailles Treaty meant a tragedy for the future development of Central Europe – this cliché has continued in a weakened form even to the present; in literary theoretical discourse, however, the Hungarians acquired a sympathetic primacy as early as the interwar period, for Hungarian comparatists brought into comparative literary studies Central Europe as a scholarly problem (see Vajda). At the Budapest International Congress of Literary History in 1931, whose main theme was the methods of literary history and possibilities of its interpretation, the Hungarian Romance scholar Sándor Eckhardt gave a paper entitled *Methods and Problems of Comparative Literature in Central Europe*. In line with Tieghem’s distinction between *littérature comparée* and *littérature générale*, (at the congress Paul van Tieghem spoke about the conflict and complementarity of “historical” and “aesthetic” methods) he took research into Central European literature as a comparative theme of international literary history, as a logical expression of general literature marking analogical development tendencies in a concrete socio-cultural space, irrespective of whether the tendencies are manifested by means of “influences” or “similarities”. Eckhardt also tried to specify the Hungarian cultural contribution to the Central European spiritual atmosphere: finding it somewhat simplistically in the mediatory and export functions, in unidirectionally realized influences through which Hungarian literature in the Habsburg Monarchy exerted influence, with the exception of dominant Austria, on its “more backward” neighbours. Central Europe thus, in Eckhardt’s understanding, fell into the “literary zones” and value spheres of artistic influences and borrowing that “beamed out”, corresponding to the terminology of Tieghem’s *littérature comparée* analysing binary phenomena between the two phenomena, especially from two central points – Vienna and Budapest.

One of the successful attempts to come to terms with the Central European liter-

ary area is the three-volume project of editors Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer entitled *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries, I–III*, which was initiated by the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA). It is essentially a comparative history of literatures written in European languages. The project – based on the criticism of traditional approaches, i.e. on the criticism of Eurocentrism and universalism – consists of introductory, survey texts, as well as interpretations of selected works from individual national literatures, with methodological theses outlined in the first three chapters (Valdés; Neubauer and Cornis-Pope; Magocsi). While a detailed evaluation will naturally remain in the competence of historians of national literatures, I will briefly try to outline the basic starting points of this unique project, which should become subject of critical discussions among Central European Slavonic studies scholars.

From the mixture of terminological chaos and political connotations connected with the concept of Mitteleuropa (F. Naumann), Central Europe, Eastern Europe and the Balkans, the editors chose a new neutral concept of East Central Europe that approximates a wider conception of classical Central Europe and which includes the area ranging from the Balkans to the Mediterranean, or the area from the Czech Republic to Moldova. This makes the conception different from the Polish understanding of Central Eastern Europe (O. Halecki, J. Kłoczowski, P. Wandycz, and so on) as an interspace between the Adriatic and Baltic Sea defined in opposition to Euroasian “barbaric” Russia. The comparative concept which was inspired by the French school *Annales*, M. Foucault, hermeneutics, and especially by the poststructuralist understanding of history as plastic narration and multilayered text in the sense of “live”, “synergic” organism, gives up explanatory procedure, used criteria and periodization derived from a linear-teleological perspective and temporary continuity of the historical community. On the contrary, it balances between formalism and contextualization as two extremes, freely moves from social-political history to literary topography and geography, to key literary historical concepts as genres, literary kinds, movements, periods, schools, institutions, etc. It may be added that the Central-Eastern European context is sometimes understood as specifically postcolonial. For example, in his *Comparative Literature: Theory, Method, Application*, the world famous comparatist Tötösy de Zepetnek attributes this region with the status of colonialism in the years 1945–1989, but what he means is rather secondary colonialism carried out through ideological, social-political or cultural means. The colonial influence of the West (especially France and England) here in Central and Eastern Europe supposedly enters the competition with the fallen mass culture imported from America. This does not apply only to the 20th century – according to Tötösy de Zepetnek, the mediatory function of cultural value was of a “self-referential” nature; it was a means of national identity and sovereignty. Moreover, the effort at emulating Western culture was understood as integration, as a return to historical roots.

The typological method of historical-geographical modelling pushes back the emphasis on authors, their biographies and interpretations of works. Instead of monumental synthesis and a compact picture, editors put together, from various angles

and fragmentary statements, a partial and pluralistic discourse of “micro-history” that has – metaphorically speaking – the form of a literary scan of the last two centuries. From this follows especially the interest in intercultural dialogue of individual literatures that would use the theory of regionalism to develop the value contradiction of the centre and periphery. Attention is therefore concentrated on the frequent phenomena of emigration, censorship, suppressed literatures, on the categories of bi-literariness and bilingualism, on authorial multilingualism, on minority literatures, or on the way of “cohabitation” and existence of various ethnic literatures in one state. In this orientation it is possible to see the stimuli of Bakhtinian culturological dialogism and of several postcolonial conceptions of current comparative studies, like, for example, the works of H. Bhabha or A. Gnisci. The editors rightly point to the Slavonic – non-Slavonic nature of Central Europe, to the confliction of ideologies, the local and ethnically-linguistic fragmentariness of the region, to cultural nationalisms which have caused that the cultural unity of Central Europe resulted not only from mutual communication but from an analogical attitude to Western centres like, for example, Paris. Giving preference to the sociological-culturological approach also generally means semantic shift from “clear” literature towards “literary culture” as a complex polysystem of literary communication, including the institutions which take part in the communication. Literary culture as a memory *sui generis* thus is represented by cultural models in their mutual relationships, textual and extra-textual. In spite of the undisputed contribution of the *History*, which provides the paradoxical impression of variety in cultural unity, there remains a problem of applicatory passages, i.e. individual interpretations of works of national literature that are moving away from the methodological framework of editors. In Czech literature it is, for example, an essayistic explication of Hašek’s *Švejk* or interpretation of Hrabal’s short story *Jarmilka* that fall into superficial essayism and repeat traditional approaches, not trying to “structurally” set the artefact into Central European circumstances (see Ambros; Mercks). Generally, however, the three-volume project remains an original attempt at how to methodologically grasp the supranational history of literatures moving from “clear” philology to the theory of areas, and sociological and culturological sciences.

In commonly used journalistic and political discourse, as a model and somewhat simplified, two conceptions of Central Europe may be distinguished: the minimalist and the maximalist conception (Kontler 10–11). The minimalist conception considers the area the last “island” of the West, with regard to shared historical structures and cultural values; Central-Europeanism here becomes an elite civilizational attitude using the Western European perspective to look at the Balkans and Russia, i.e. at southern and eastern parts of Europe, seeing them as “lagging behind” in their development (see Dorovský). The minimalist conception works with binary oppositions, as discussed by the French deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida (we vs. they, our vs. foreign, civilization vs. barbarians), with the myth of centre and periphery, borders and end of Europe, which contributes to the dichotomist (dualistic) conception of Central Europe. In this way it is understood also by Milan Kundera, who in the mid-1980s defined this area as a specific region of small nations between

Germany and Russia culturally belonging to the West, however politically (from 1945) ranked to the East. The maximalist conception of Central Europe understands Europe mainly axiologically, geographical constructs being a side product, and the existence of the centre of Europe itself is thus questioned as a sometimes purposive division of Europe into individual parts. Europe, that is also its central part, is profiled as a set of historically originated ideas mostly related to the tradition of Latin Christianity defining the relation of the “old continent” as a whole to neighbouring continents, especially to Asia – the origin, as we often forget it, of Europe’s civilization.

Frequent reflections on Central Europe in geographical symbolism are connected with the Danube as a dividing and connecting element. For example, the Italian Germanist Claudio Magris perceives the motif of Central-Europeanism in connection with the analysis of the Habsburg myth, with the sacralization of the Danube, which crosses the borders of Central Europe and connects it with the Balkans and the Mediterranean area: “The Danube, it is a German-Hungarian-Slavonic-Romance-Jewish Central Europe standing in sharp contradiction to the German Reich, it is the ‘hinter-national’ ekumena, it is the world ‘behind nations’” (Magris, *Dunaj* 24–25; Magris, *Habsburský mýtus v moderní rakouské literatuře*). The Danube as a sacred Slavonic river in its longitude – these are borders between Europe and the Balkans. While the German Rhine guards the ethnic purity of Germanness (let us recall the heavy mysticism of Wagner’s operas), the Danube means communication and dialogue, mediating the meeting of Germans and Austrians with Western Slavs, but also with Hungarians and Southern Slavs, as well as with Muslims and the Orthodox culture. Although in relation to the Habsburg myth the Danube motif expresses certain nostalgia for a multinational empire and a higher Central European identity, there are different opinions concerning the question of to what extent Central-Europeanism was reflected in the Monarchy’s very centre – Austria. While Magris remains sceptical – not considering the Central-Europeanism “the true constant of Austrian history” (29), the Russian Germanist D. Zatonkij speaks about the Danubian cultural-political area in which dominant Austria acted as a bridge, i.e. a mediating chain between the German West and the Slavonic East, or occupied the position of a guardian of Western European space; it is enough to freely paraphrase a frequently quoted ironical statement of the Austrian chancellor Metternich saying that the borders of Europe (that is “civilized”) end at the gates of Vienna. As Russian Slavonic studies scholar S. Šerlaimova shows, the theory neglects the meaning of direct contacts of Western Slavonic literatures, which within the Habsburg Monarchy created a specific community with a complicated conglomerate of internal and external relations (Šerlaimová 167–179). Although in general Austrian life and institutions often penetrated into the themes of Slavonic as well as Hungarian and Romanian writers, it was often just an external framework, and the decisive factor was the selection of language as a determining distinctive code, which was done, from the times of national revival, mostly according to Slavonic writers’ ethnic origin. Inspirational lessons may be drawn from the area of linguistics, theory of language unions, or areas based on the analysis of geographical linkages of the languages’ typological features (even structurally differ-

ent) coexisting in close neighbourhood.³ Frequent influences and contacts mutually enrich the languages, which, however, preserve the indigenoussness of historical development. Modern linguistics speaks, for example, about the Central European language area, or about a wider Danubian area, a space of contact and mutual influencing of the Indo-European languages of two various groups, Germanic and Slavonic, with the Ugro-Finnish Hungarian, and points to parallel processes, convergent tendencies in phonological and phonic areas, as well as to morphological and, especially, lexical areas (see Newerkla; Kurzová).

If “minimalist” conceptions, drawing on the adapted Habsburg or German model, derived from the identification of a geographical centre and relatively exact definition of borders and territory of Central Europe, the “maximalist” conception, omitting the determination of a geographical centre of Europe, identified Central Europe with Europe itself: the conception of Europe may be understood not only in a narrower, geographical meaning but also in a wider, axiological one: Europe acts out not only as a territory, a continent from the Atlantic Ocean, North Sea, to the Ural and the Mediterranean Sea, but especially as an “idea historically originated [...] defined on the basis of values in relation to other contents” (Čapek 64), i.e. a conscious participation in the unity in variety, in the multi-civilizational and multicultural perspective on the world. Here it is perhaps necessary to search for answers to the question of whether, for example, Serbian, Ukrainian, or even Romanian literature still belong, with their nature, to the literatures of Central European nations. The Central European literary area thus creates an integrated complex – Slavonic, Germanic (German, eventually Austrian), partly also Romance (Northern Italy, Romania), Ugro-Finnish (Hungary), and Jewish, linked either with German linguistic culture, or with other, often also Slavonic cultures (Czech lands, Poland, Ukraine), acting externally as an independent, unified phenomenon, but on the other hand breaking down into its components which are differently defined against one another. It holds true for the Slavs as well: defining themselves against Germans establishes significant differences between the Czechs, Poles and Slovenians, while against Hungarians establishes differences between the Slovaks, Croatians and East Slavs living in the region; the Jews, in turn, are defined against all.

It is the Jewish element which often becomes a substitutionary element of Central Europe – which is supposedly located there where Jews live in Europe (M. Kundera). The Serbian writer Danilo Kiš, who agrees with Kundera in this, goes even further: in Central Europe Jews always embodied movement and change; they were a connecting boundary between small European nations and contributed to the greatest degree to the multicultural nature of this part of Europe. The history of Central Europe supposedly ended with a forced decline and displacement of Jews, since their tragic fate mirrors a psychical trauma of the Central European intellectual who was uprooted from his/her “native” soil. Moreover, the writers of Jewish origin living in Central Europe, like F. Kafka, B. Schulz, I. Bashevitz, E. Canetti, G. Konrad, S. Marai and others, were often labelled as “Central European” writers. However, Central Europe does not necessarily have to be only Jewish, being more often connected with the Christian tradition. For example, Pope John Paul II spoke about Christianity as

an integrating universal value that has to precede the economic-political unification of Europe. In his opinion, Central Europe itself may become a model of interreligious and intercultural dialogue not only among the believers, since it is a kind of “two lungs of Europe”, a place where Eastern (Cyril and Methodius) and Western Latin Rites get harmonically intermingled and mutually complemented. Similarly, one of his predecessors, Paul VI, referred to the *Regula* of St. Benedict as the first written document proclaiming European constitution and requesting the Europeans to observe common, i.e. Christian, way of life (Sowiński 36).

The Central European complex with its varying position of unstable centres and peripheries and with a specific overlapping of nationalities, cultures and religions is, paradoxically, “doomed” to respecting cultural variety and difference, to permanent criticism of a narrowly ethnocentric principle. Ideas connecting Central Europe with Slavonic patriotism as obligatory element, as it is formulated, for example, by the Polish Slavonic studies scholar J. Kornhauser, cannot thus be accepted unreservedly. Although Slavs make up a quantitative majority in Central Europe, the purity of ethnic settlement in this region was already in the deep Middle Ages substituted by the linguistic, cultural, as well as political overlapping of the so-called small nations (see Hroch). Central European centrism testifies to the multi-levelled nature of the phenomenon of centrisms, their contradictoriness. It is defined against Western European, or German centrism; at the same time, however, also against South and East: it also necessarily contains in itself all these elements. It thus consists of what it, as a whole, negates, against what it creates its centres. It is defined structurally by shifting emphasis on individual components of the whole, either putting to the fore the Slavonic element against strengthening Pan-Germanism, or calling for its Central Europeanism, Germanness, Prague Germanness and Jewishness against the strengthening pressure of the Slavonic East, showing that it is also Slavonic, but, at the same time, not only Slavonic; when, however, it is also Slavonic, then rather Western Slavonic with a more intensive link to Western European literatures than to Eastern and Southern writing. This shifting, permanent internal re-forming of the phenomenon of Central Europeanism is Central European centrism’s weakness, its disintegrating weak point. This instability, which acts destructively, is, at the same time, its stability: that which is not fixed and unequivocally stated, which does not have a fixed territorial, ethnic, ideological shape, which is moving and vague, can also be difficult to destroy totally and without trace. Individual components of Central European centrism do not stand against one another as alternative parallels: they act against one another divergently, but cannot definitively suppress one another. The English political scientist and journalist T. G. Ash emphasizes Central Europe as a specific microcosm of mutually tangled languages and ethnoses on a small space in which “every national [...] culture has its specialities and beauties and where even the smallest language is veiled to a soft difference in the way of life and thinking, getting to fruition during centuries” (14).

Literary history sometimes speaks about the so-called Central European writers, or the writers linguistically and personally connected to this area and who in their texts express with an extraordinary intensity the ideas of Central-Europeanism

through their thematic evocation of its cultural atmosphere. In spite of the temporary and artistic dissimilarity of these authors, it is evident that their works are connected or characterized through their origin and localization – the last decade of the Austro-Hungary's existence, i.e. its analogical cultural development, which survived the breakup of the Monarchy in 1918 and definitely finished after 1930 in its most varied parts as Prague, Cracow, Vienna, Bratislava, Košice, Budapest, Zagreb, Ljubljana, etc. (Měšťan 369–376). Even though in political life Central European states were sharply nationally differentiated and refused any forms of coexistence, on the cultural scene a remarkable symbiosis can be noted in a series of -isms, artistic movements and streams, despite the fact that these works critically mirror circumstances in Austro-Hungary as a “prison-house of nations”. This is also connected with the question of whether there exists a specific Central European style as well, or whether the ideas of Central Europe can be observed on the level of genre, poetics and style, i.e. in literary structures themselves. As the extensive genealogical project *Žánrové metamorfózy v střeoevropském kontextu* (Generic Metamorphoses in Central European Context, 2003-2006) has shown, most often it is the grotesque, irony, satire or the development of small theatrical genres in the early 20th century in the form of a new type of political-satirical cabaret, and the boom of non-traditional forms of the previously lowbrow popular culture. For example, Polish and Slovak theorists (E. Kasperski, T. Žilka, etc.) rightly claim that even at the end of the 20th century these manifestations may be studied especially in the interpoeticity of artefacts as certain supra-temporal models and constants. It is not a coincidence that what becomes the subject of serious research is the variant of Central European postmodernism in the grotesque and satirical fictions by current Polish, Ukrainian, Czech and Slovak writers.

The Czech reflection of Central-Europeanism has often been brought up to date in existential, fatal moments of development, and was reduced to the question of historical choice and cultural orientation, which led to the reflections on Czech-German relations. Although at the beginning of the 1920s the Czech-American theorist René Wellek maintained that what was important for the development of Czech-German relations was not the “fertilizing” influence of the more developed literature, but a live domestic tradition capable of transforming most varied period stimuli: “We cannot choose for our cultural orientation this or that nation, since by this we would be choosing all and at the same time nothing” (Wellek 159); the Czech reflection of Central Europe was connected with its co-belonging to the Non-Slavonic West. On the contrary, the attitudes to the Slavonic East were swinging according to political orientation and strategic aims: this was also enhanced by geographical localization of the Czech lands in the centre of Europe which are in direct contact with German territory and, at the same time, protected from Eastern Slavs, especially from Russia, by the historical Upper Hungary, i.e. by the present Slovakia. The Czech reflection was also a permanent discussion on the sense of Czech history, i.e. on European roots of the place and culture of the Czech nation in Europe. There is no important Czech historian or philosopher who has not contributed to the problem. Of many statements, observations, as well as theories, including the struggles for the *Manuscripts of Dvůr Králové and Zelená Hora*, the presentations of H. G. Schauer, T. G. Masaryk,

the historical legacy of the Goll positivist school and later 20th century discourse, as it was convincingly demonstrated by the Czech historian M. Havelka in the work *Spor o smysl českých dějin 1895–1938* (1997), resulted the following basic idea: in the West-East antinomy the Czechs have always felt to be culturally and politically connected with Western Europe, which geographically included German counties (scattered at the beginning of the 19th century) and the present Benelux. It is evident that the historically first concepts of Central Europe were in the Czech context related with various attempts at German unification. It was the German historian F. List who as early as in the first half of the 19th century connected the concept of Mitteleuropa with a unified economic space, which had to be preceded by political cooperation. He understood Central Europe in a broad sense of the word, that is, as a territory exceeding the original German territory and stretching from the Rhine to the Visla, from the Dneper and Baltic Sea to the Balkans (see Křen).

A similar perception of Central Europe was proposed by T. G. Masaryk in his polemic with the Prussian militarist F. Naumann. While Naumann linked Central Europe with the spread of the ideology of the so-called Germanness, which was to become the axis of a new political and economic association of “central” states between the French in the West and the Russians in the East, T. G. Masaryk criticized this idea since it opened space for the dominance of German influence in Central Europe. Masaryk liked neither the idea of constitutional interconnection of German empire with the Habsburg monarchy as two war allies, nor the threat of the germanizing assimilation of Slavs, who would be given local government, but the executive power would be taken over by supranational professional commissions and offices. In his treatise *Nová Evropa* (1920), by Central Europe Masaryk understood an imaginary geographical belt stretching from the North to the South, from the Baltic Sea to the Mediterranean Sea. This region is marked by ethnic, linguistic and cultural variety and consists of small nations reaching out from Scandinavia to the southernmost point of Greece. This was the reason why Masaryk included among Central European nations the Swedes, Norwegians, Danes, Finns, Latvians, Estonians and Lithuanians, as well as Poles, Sorbs, Slovaks, Hungarians, Slovenians, Serbs and Croats, Rumanians, Albanians, Greeks and Bulgarians, even partially also European Turks, but not, for example, Germans, Austrians and, naturally, Russians. Masaryk first politically formulated his project of the Democratic Union of Central Europe on 26 October 1918 in the Independence Hall in Philadelphia, with support of the American President W. Wilson, claiming that a federalist and democratic Central Europe made up of small nations situated between Germany and Russia would be a stabilizing element in relations between Western and Eastern Europe. Masaryk deepened the idea that the centre of Europe should not divide Europe but connect it, in his capacity as the first president of the Czechoslovak Republic after 1918, which, among other things, was reflected in his sympathies for the Pan-European movement of R. Coudenhove-Kalergi. Its basis was to be the unification of Germany and France, to which should join the small, newly originated Central European states, including Czechoslovakia.

It seems that even at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries the phenomenon of Central Europe will not stop being the subject of permanent meta-critical discourse,

usually calling for cultural balance between the West and the East. What remains for the future is only to hope that reflections on Central Europe will continue to be a real variant of dialogical coexistence, an example of tolerant cohabitation and respect of the plurality in unity, a place of meeting and mutual understanding.

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NOTES

- ¹ Kola here refers to the paper of the Polish scholar M. Dąbrowska-Partyka “Literatura jako metajęzyk kultury” given at the conference organized at the 50th anniversary of the foundation of Polish Slavonic studies at the Polish Academy of Sciences on 20 September 2004.
- ² Sarmats were mythical predecessors of the Poles; the Polish nobility derived their ethnic ancestry from them.
- ³ The founders of linguistic-areal typology are considered to be the Russian linguist N. S. Trubetzkoy and the Czech structuralist of Russian origin R. O. Jakobson. Their conception drew on the conviction that languages in geographical contiguity are communicatively influenced to such a degree that their structural features can develop together.

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