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East-Central Europe in comparative literature studies: introduction

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The *Neohelicon* mini-cluster "East-Central Europe in comparative literature studies" brings together a small selection of articles based on papers that were presented in the October 2018 conference of the Hungarian Comparative Literature Association, hosted by the Károli Gáspár University of the Reformed Church in Hungary, Budapest.[1] As a pale reflection on the ideal of unlimitedly polyglot discourse championed by Hugó Meltzl and Sámuel Brassai, the annual meetings of the Hungarian Comparative Literature Association are traditionally bilingual (Hungarian and English), and usually attract participants from several countries, in the case of the 2018 conference: Hungary, France, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Serbia, Slovenia, and the USA. When Meltzl and Brassai published the world's first journal on comparative literature studies, their ideal was an unlimitedly polyglot periodical. The title was printed in eleven languages, and *Neohelicon* still uses its Latin version *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* as subtitle to pay tribute to that pioneering enterprise originating from East-Central Europe, from the multicultural Transylvanian city of Kolozsvár/Klausenburg/Cluj-Napoca.[2] Even if the ideal of unlimited polyglotism cannot be sustained today, the Hungarian Comparative Literature Association at least tries to avoid monolingual comparative literature conferences and engage in dialogue with comparatists of the broader region and those interested in its cultural history. The problems that the 2018 Budapest meeting sought to address, and that became relevant to the present selection were "The memory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Balkan question, and East-Central Europe," "Complexities of religious and cultural identity in the Central-European literatures," "defining Central Europe from different perspectives," and "Between East and West: questions of in-betweenness, mediation, and cultural translation."

[1] Special thanks must be expressed to the chief organisers Ágnes Klára Papp and Csaba Horváth.

[2] For *Neohelicon*'s commitment to cherish the local-regional traditions of comparative literature see Hajdu (2008). For the importance of *Acta Comparationis Litterarum Universarum* for the formation of the discipline see Damrosch (2006). The journal's achievement tends to be attributed to Hugó Meltzl alone, but for the crucial role the other editor Sámuel Brassai played in its history see T. Szabó (2013).

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The present mini-cluster is not the first and hopefully not the last time *Neohelicon* has provided a forum for discussions of the East-Central-European cultural space. For example the first issue of the year 2005 published the proceedings of a conference on national stereotypes, sponsored by the International Comparative Literature Association's Research Committee for Eastern and South-Eastern Europe. That committee existed from 2001 to 2009 and their conferences in several locations of the region resulted in intriguing publications. A comparative literature approach to the East-Central-European area must take into consideration the tremendous achievement of the comparatist community, which was published between 2004 and 2010 in the four volumes of the *Comparative history of literatures in European languages,* edited by the late John Neubauer (who supported *Neohelicon* as a member of the advisory board from 2000 to 2015) and Marcel Cornis-Pope, entitled *History of the literary cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and disjunctures in the nineteenth and twentieth century* (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 2004, 2006, 2007, 2010). It would be far from the reality of the humanities to say that the several dozen contributors who filled up about 2500 pages in a rather large format left nothing to say about the literary cultures of the area for at least a decade, but that project will necessarily provide a point of departure and a reference standard for studies still to be done in the region's literature for many years. The articles of the present cluster are (most of the time implicitly) linked to those volumes in many ways. Continuation through discussing literature produced after 2010 is but the most obvious option.

The first article in the present cluster, "Amphibolic space of Central Europe in the writings of Aleksandar Tišma and Danilo Kiš" by Vladimir Gvozden, describes the dialectics of the supposed cultural unity and diversity of the region from Serbian viewpoint, analyzing novels by two writers who have influenced a much wider context than the Serbian one and for whom the concept of Central Europe was extremely important. With the metaphor of amphibolism, Gvozden illuminates the dialectics of, on the one hand, constructing the concept of a regional culture from smaller national or subnational units that sometimes tend to regard themselves as antagonistic and, on the other, constructing local identities in contrast to other geographically adjacent ones. The geographical closeness of the other, the ubiquitous contact zones in the region can be regarded as the essence of East-Central Europe, even if the world wars and their respective aftermath pushed the nation states significantly towards ethnical homogeneity. Ethnically diverse ancestry, many times combined with a bi- or multilingual family tradition, is characteristic of innumerable authors here. Gvozden seeks to analyse two novels by writers who were born on the linguistic border of Serbian and Hungarian (a border which is a contact zone rather than a border*line*)[3] or the political border of Yugoslavia and Hungary. Those novels—both published in the year 1972—*Hourglass* by Danilo Kiš (1935–1989) and *The Book of Blam* by Aleksandar Tišma (1924–2003)[4] give him the opportunity to show how fiction creates a Central-Europe that is more closely tied to time (i.e.

[3] For a typology of borders see Fludernik (1999).

[4] As a true comparatist, Gvozden refers to the original Serbian texts, but for those who are not familiar with that language, they are available among others in English, French, and German translation as well, see Kiš (1982, 1988, 1990), Tišma (1986, 1995, 2016).

cultural tradition or familial memory) than to (actual, geographical) space, one that is more imaginary than political.

Jewish ancestry and heritage play an important role in the identity construction of both writers Gvozden discusses. The Jewish communities, which experienced a historically varying measure of oppression and exclusion, were probably more sensitive to challenges of local identity. And even if the East-Central European Jewry was far from homogeneous in aspects of economic status, religious attitude, political inclinations, language, and national identity, they can be regarded as a group that provides a unifying feature for a cultural description of the region, and not only because of the shared traumas. The *History of the literary cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and disjunctures in the nineteenth and twentieth century* may also suggest something like that through its various chapters, sometimes clusters of chapters focusing on the Jewish culture of the area. The most obvious is the presence of a Jewish viewpoint in Volume II that utilises a mostly spatial approach. All the three parts of the volume contain a chapter on the Jewish experience, which does not mean that this topic does not appear elsewhere.[5] In the first part on "Cities and sites of hybrid literary identity and multicultural production" the longest chapter is entitled "Cities in Ashkenaz" (Wolitz et al. 2006). Part 2 on "Regional and cultural hybridization" contains the chapter "Ashkenaz or the Jewish cultural presence in East-Central Europe" (Wolitz 2006). It happens in Part 3 "The literary reconstruction East-Central Europe's imagined communities: Native to diasporic" that the toponym Auschwitz appears in a chapter's title: "A tragic one-way ticket to universality: Bucharest–Paris–Auschwitz" (Berindeanu 2006).

Susan Rubin Suleiman compares a French and a Hungarian author of the interwar period for whose writing the identity question of assimilated Jews was of utmost importance. The French writer, Irène Némirovsky (1903–1942), was also born in East-central Europe, in Kiev. The other, Károly Pap (1897–1845), was born in Hungary. They both died in Nazi concentration camps. Suleiman scrutinizes the "Jewish question" from the viewpoint of Jewish authors: the question of their Jewish identity that can be triggered both by rejection on behalf of the majority society (i.e. the anti-Semitic claim disguised as "the Jewish question" that Jews cannot be really assimilated) and by claim of solidarity on behalf of less or non-assimilated Jews, who may be separated from them by a wide gap in social status, language, acculturation, or even religion. If assimilated Jewish characters find the non-assimilated Jews repulsive and the idea of their shared identity insulting, that can be easily interpreted as the infiltration of anti-Semitic discourse. Is this part of a perfect assimilation?

Anti-Semitic discourse could easily permeate someone's language in the early twentieth century, even that of Jewish writers. Suleiman quotes the harsh sentences Jenő Cholnoky (1870–1950) wrote about the "Jewish question," wondering if his current environment in Transylvania (where he lived from 1905–1919) with its

[5] E.g. the chapter on the "Topographies and literary cultures in Budapest" by John Neubauer and Mihály Szegedy-Maszák contains a two-page description of the Jewish culture in Budapest, which, although not an individual subchapter as those on the Serb or Slovak constituents of the city, is not shorter than those (Neubauer and Szegedy-Maszák 2006, pp. 169–170).

mixed national communities (Hungarians, Romanians, Germans, Armenians, and Jews) and marginality "may have made him especially sensitive to issues of exclusion and inclusion." Maybe so. His native county in Transdanubia, with 21% German and 4% Slovak population in the time of his youth, was undeniably less mixed, but also far from ethnically homogeneous. He definitely showed hostility towards non-assimilated newcomers. However, he did not only experience cultural otherness in Austria-Hungary. As a young geographer he spent two years in China (1896–1898) and in the two volumes he wrote *From the Land of Dragons* he severely criticised the semi-colonial hierarchy of colour and white superiority he witnessed there, especially in the everyday life of Shanghai (Cholnoky 1900). At that time, as a citizen of Austria-Hungary he was a complete outsider. It happened only in 1901, after the western allies' intervention in the Boxer Uprising, that the Monarchy acquired a 1.08 km^2 enclave in Tianjin and became a colonial power in Asia. The same person who represents an uncompromising anti-racist standpoint in colonial context can use anti-Semitic vocabulary to describe domestic issues in Hungary.

Suleiman mentions how much major Hungarian writers like László Németh (1901–1975) appreciated Károly Pap. An interesting documentation of this is the critique Németh wrote on Pap's book *Jewish wounds and sins*, in which the way he paraphrased the original argument[6] makes the infiltration of anti-Semitic discourse visible. For example where Pap spoke of the sickness of nations that invited or allowed Jewry in ("a nation did not get sick because it allowed Jews in, but it allowed them in because it was already sick," Pap 1934, p. 62), Németh spoke of the incompleteness of those nations (Németh 1989, p. 422), and rather speaks of the original sickness of Jews, which is their antagonism to any kind of state. Pap was actually unable to completely avoid the agency of the anti-Semitic metaphor of Jewry as sickness[7] but he tried, while Németh consequently utilised it, maybe—as his fans tend to believe—unintentionally.

Volume III of the *History of the literary cultures of East-Central Europe* contains a chapter on "The footsteps of Gavrilo Princip" by Guido Snel in the "1918" section (which despite being anchored in its last year, rather discusses WWI and its memory) of "Part I: Nodes of political time" (Snel 2004). Snel analysed the monuments erected on or near the place of the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand during different historical periods, the historiography of the Tito era, and Ivo Andrić's *The Bridge on the Drina* with its nationalist interpretations in the Yugoslavian war period, but also Aleksandar Hemon's short story "The accordion" from the collection *The Question of Bruno* (Hemon 2000). The latter will be an important reference point (among many others) for Emmanuel Bouju, who in his paper "The Princip principle" focuses on a novel Guido Snel could not know of, the *Sarajevo omnibus* by Velibor Čolić, published in 2012, as an outstanding example of the several post-2010 French novels that describe or relate Princip's attack. Since in French

[6] The review is analysed from a different viewpoint in Dávidházi (2003).

[7] E.g. "In the sense of an infection that corrupts morally and debilitates physically, syphilis was to become a standard trope in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth century anti-Semitic polemics" (Sontag 1977, p. 59).

transliteration the murderer's name sometimes appears as (Gabriel) *Principe*, which means principle, Bouju can create an etymological or at least paronomastic connection between Gavrilo Princip and a principle he discovers in history, namely the way we retrospectively create stories to talk about the past. An extremely accidental chain of events made a quite marginal character retrospectively a historical figure of mythical proportions. I would like to add that the family legend (see Stoltz 2014) that the Princips' family name goes back to the Italian *principe* (i.e. 'prince') does not only connect him etymologically to 'principle'—since both the Latin *princeps* (the origin of Italian *principe*) and *principium* (the origin of French *principe,* German *Prinzip,* and English *principle*) have the same root that means 'first'—but also connects the perpetrator with the victim who was born as *Prinz* (Prince) Franz Ferdinand and died as an *Erzherzog* (Archduke) or Crown Prince. And, Bouju argues, history prefers a *prince,* an individual who can be made to figure both as protagonist of a fairy tale and a locus of origin for historical developments. Both Hemon, an Anglophone Bosnian writer from North-America, and Čolić, a Francophone Bosnian writer from Western Europe, put a (maybe fictional) ancestor of their own in the physical vicinity of the Sarajevo attack, and this family connection seems to function as a telling symbol of the past that lives with us, that Bouju describes with the metaphor of the phantom pain.

The memory of Princip's deed is strongly tied to the memory of the First World War, but also to the twentieth-century European nationalisms, which both invite us to make a link between the 1914 Sarajevo attack and Sarajevo's 1992 siege during the Yugoslavian war. For Bouju the building of the Sarajevo Town Hall makes this link visible: the building from which Franz Ferdinand departed to his fatal ride after a reception, which became the National and University Library, and was burned down in 1992. We can go back one step further in the past. The Town Hall was built in 1892–1894, during the Austro-Hungarian occupation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, when the (Hungarian) viceroy Benjámin Kállay commissioned the Austrian architect Alexander Wittek to design it. The building can be regarded as the heritage of the colonizing/integrating plans of the Habsburg Empire in Bosnia,[8] which was to become a national institution of the Bosnians.

Susan Rubin Suleiman, who after her important achievements in the fields of gender studies, (Jewish) trauma studies, and in the study of French modernist literature, seems increasingly involved in East-central European comparative literature, does not only appear in the cluster as a contributor but also as a topic: her self-writing is discussed in Zoltán Z. Varga's article "Departures and returns: Cultural identities, historical traumas and personal paths in Susan Rubin Suleiman's *Budapest Diary*." This is not the first time this has happened to her. In a voluminous compendium on exile literature of East-central Europe, she was both the author of an essay on Imre Kertész's internal exile (Suleiman 2009) and at the same one of the four authors discussed by Ksenia Polouektova in her article on narratives of exile and homecoming in Jewish self-writing (Polouektova 2009, esp. 445–449). Z. Varga's discussion focuses on this duplicity of writing and scholarship, on the ways the academic

[8] For the image of Kállay's achievement in Hungarian literature see Hajdu (2007).

training in comparative literature preforms the experience of the personal past in the context of the strange-familiar Central-European space, and literary scholarship forms the expression of that experience. Suleiman tells the story of revisiting the forgotten birthplace—forgotten because packed with suppressed traumas—as a tourist and a visiting scholar, but also as someone equipped with the academic skills of understanding a foreign culture and making oneself feel at home in new places. The rediscovery of the forgotten mother tongue, which not only helps understand the locals but also deepens the experience of exclusion and cultural alienatedness, brings along a (re)discovery of the Hungarian literary tradition. A literary scholar must enjoy the adventure of a new body of literature, but this joy brings with it the personal childhood memories, a huge proportion of which is traumatic. The paradoxes of homeliness and feeling rejected, the realization of a shared past with others with inscribed antagonisms might be a general East-central European experience, which, according to Z. Varga's analysis, Suleiman's self-writing expresses in the thrilling dynamics of the personal and the historical, the emotional and the intellectual, life experience and accumulation of academic knowledge.

The emphasis placed on the personal experience will possibly characterise the scholarly discourse of East-central European region. In some places, the texts in the current cluster show signs of the authors' intensive emotional involvement, perhaps a consequence of the challenging topic, namely the literary representations of traumatic personal engagement in the historical experience of a troubled geographical space.

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