The Professional Comparatist

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It is reasonable to expect from a scholar to stop from time to time to question the meaning of one's work, rethink its prerequisites, and be aware of the limits of the activities, the cultivation of own academic fields. One of the most important limits is immediately apparent: the knowledge of foreign languages, literatures and cultures. The knowledge of my mother tongue is the least lumbering, this is a certainty; but the rest of the languages I speak, I can only speak worse. Other than Hungarian, unfortunately, I can speak and read only Russian, Polish and Slovakian, and I can read Czech, German and English. I can even handle a little bit of Croatian. Putting the so-called big languages (that are necessary for familiarizing oneself with academic literature) aside, my knowledge of languages introduced here is obviously just a fragment of the languages, and thus the literatures of East-Central Europe (no matter how one would define that entity): not only Ukrainian and Belarusian, but also the Baltic, Romanian and Southern Slavic languages are missing from it. That's why all that I know of these literatures and cultures I am able to know only through translations (Hungarian or foreign) and through studies,

which means I really lack the ability to perceive the subtleties of these texts. Any academic work can thus only be done with the awareness of the limits imposed by such inadequacies.

Why, then have I chosen this rather murky field, of Central European Studies? To put it briefly: for its exoticity (see Péter Krasztev's "the mutant's exoticity"). I was drawn by the possibility of exploring a field that, even if it wasn't a complete blank spot, was hardly noticeable on the cultural map. And, not incidentally, I wanted to be home in this corner of Central Europe. However, with all these limits in mind, this could not be done without the acceptance of the necessarily fragmentary nature of my knowledge and with the anxious consciousness that I would be *between*, and not *in*, things. This has, at times, filled me with despair; at other times, however, I could understand it as my mentor, Endre Bojtár, put it in an eye-opening study of his: "... it comes to light that this is the appropriate place to be. This is the appropriate perspective. To be between things means to be free."

Central-Europeanness: as I see it

"Central-Europeanness" (let's call it a particular set of cultural phenomena for now) can be understood as an element of a complicated communication process, as a part of cultural communication, while it's also apparent that this element has a significant role in intercultural contact. It is necessary, then, to examine it further. The understanding of this set of phenomena is one of the basic tasks of any researcher carrying out comparative studies on this region. The other task, connected to this, is the understanding that in intercultural communication we are always talking about cultural translation (viewed from the receiving culture's standpoint in the process of reception), thus, when translating texts, we must discuss the translatability or

untranslatability of cultures (see Kovács 2004 and Kappanyos 2015).[1] The translatability or untranslatability of any work is ultimately related to its own culture's connection to its mother tongue. When discussing cultural communication, we must then deal with the question of translatability/untranslatability, coming to terms with issues such as the paradox of works of lyric poetry being seen as untranslatable, while at the same time their translation is deemed a necessity.[2] Thus when we talk about literary translations, we can only really discuss the translatability of works of prose and drama.

The way a certain work appears in another culture is above all determined by the quality of the translation. Therefore a text has a good chance to be accepted only if it receives a good translation (which obviously points to the importance of the translator in cultural communication). From the standpoint of reception, the translation itself is decisive and the other forms of cultural mediation (reviews, critiques, studies, works of literary history, education) can only follow it, though they are unquestionably important themselves in facilitating the reception of a work.

A work that's deeply embedded in the traditions of its own culture and proves puzzling and inaccessible to foreign readers can be delivered successfully by a good translation. István Bella's new Hungarian translation of Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve*, published in 2000, is a good example of such a translation (see Balogh 2017).

If we try to describe Central Europe through the terms of communication, we must turn to semiotics to help us outline this complicated set of cultural phenomena. The mapping out of the region's most important features can be meaningfully assisted by the semiotic approach of Juri Lotman, whose early works were based on the structuralist model of communication. Recognizing the limits of this model, Lotman created a more complex, but more adequate model to describe

cultural communication, defining culture as a semiosphere (Lotman 2005).[3] This concept was created as an analogue to the Russian biologist Vladimir Ivanovich Vernadsky's concept of the biosphere. The semiosphere is a certain medium, a particular set of conditions, within which communication takes place and by which communication is made possible in the first place, that is, this medium is a prerequisite for communication to come into being.

This semiotic space isn't simply the sum of the given languages, but a precondition for their existence and operation, which both precedes them and is in constant contact with them. In this respect, the language is a function, the center of the semiotic space. In the semiotic reality, borders between languages tend to be blurry, and transitional forms are often present. No semiosphere is located in an amorphous sphere, but rather, they are enclosed by another semiosphere, and there's a constant exchange on their borders, setting off the process of creating a shared language.

Lotman's concept of the semiosphere seems to be particularly fitting for the description of Central Europe as a cultural model because it emphasizes the constant presence of *heteronomous elements*. The semiotic space is filled with languages that are distinct and different in nature, and whose relationships range on a wide scale from complete mutual translatability to complete mutual untranslatability.

The *border* is the determinative concept of the semiosphere (not only separating the outer world from the inner, but also the foreign world

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[1] Kappanyos is the first monograph on translation studies as cultural translation in Hungarian.

[2] The meaning of literary works (especially those of lyric poetry) primarily depends on connotations, or a system of connotations, that the foreign reader will not be able to fully sense or understand. See Szegedy-Maszák 2008.

[3] The Austrian cultural historian Móric Csáky uses the concept of semiosphere to describe the cultural model of Central Europe in his response to the a poll by the journal 2000. According to him, "Central Europe could be understood as a cultural space, which is characterized by pluralities, differences and heterogenities in the past and in the present, but also by constant inner translations. […] Central Europe is, figuratively speaking, an intellectual tope, an epistemological model which, as a paradigm, contributes to the recognition and analysis of similar constellations from the past and the present. […] Central Europe can be described as a paradigmatic laboratory, that became the stage for processes in the past that have turned out to be of global importance in our days, regarding the handling of differences, alterities or strangeness." (Csáky 2015)

from our own). The border will be the place of the filtering of the outer world (presumed to be a foreign-language text) and its translation to our own. The border always has two sides, one of which faces outwards, towards the outer world: this is the prerequisite for bilingualism.

In this semiosphere cut across by borders, translation (which, as Lotman points out, is the elementary act of thinking) has a highly significant role. The basic mechanism of translation is the *dialogue*, which is based on the asymmetry that reveals itself in the differences between the semiotic structures (languages) of its participants, and in the flow of messages back and forth.

The sub-semiospheres, slashed through by inner borders, existing on different levels and connected to each other in a hierarchical order, can be used to describe other subsystems, such as the models of the Central European grotesque or the Central European novel, or the Romanticism of the region. We can also approach the region from the point of view of multicultural reality, multilingualism or cosmopolitanism.

"Central-Europeanness" creates a particular context in the course of cultural communication, which constitutes the medium for interpretation. When we interpret a phenomenon, this context must be explored. Contextualization means calling forth the specific historical and cultural experiences whose presence can be felt in the literature (and, in a wider sense, culture) of the region.

The calling forth and interpretation of these specific cultural experiences is the subject of Central European comparative literary studies, which operates on another level of cultural mediation. The concept of Central Europe is historically changing: the politically motivated Central Europeanness of the '80s meant an opposition, conveying the demand for the political emancipation of the region. Miłosz (1986), Kundera (1983) or György Konrád (1980, 1989), the key figures of this Central European renaissance, cited the facts of the cultural and historical togetherness of the region in a belief that they were providing reasons for Central Europe to be separated from Eastern Europe. Miłosz ultimately points out the unnaturalness of Europe's geo-polit-

ical division in his essay "Central European Attitudes", drawing an autonomous, European image of the region:

> A hygienic reason behind our choosing the term Central Europe is that it authorizes us to look for the specificity of its culture and protects us from the temptation of misleading analogies. A curious phenomenon could be observed in European literature and the art of the last decades: the iron curtain and the differences of two political systems only in part stopped the circulation of ideas and fashions in spite of all the efforts to close the borders hermetically and to impose Russian models. In poetry, in painting and in the theatre, Warsaw, Prague and Budapest have been more similar to Paris, Amsterdam or London than to Moscow. (Milosz 1989)

Central Europe as a potential cultural model for discovering the neighboring countries' cultures meant, for a time, a considerable buoyancy, but due to the economic and political rearrangements after the regime change (and especially because of the 2004 eastern enlargements of the EU that turned the region's countries into competitors), this model gradually lost its attraction until it was practically fully suppressed. The economic and political borders have changed: the East-West axis in Europe was replaced by a North-South one, there is the Eurozone and countries outside it, there are creditors and debtors – due to all these factors, regionality does not work the same way today as it did before, and the countries of the region are situated on different sides along these dividing lines, depending on how successful or unsuccessful their catching up with the more developed Western European regions has been in the past 25 years (Réti 2014). The same conclusion has been drawn in the answers given to the 2014 polls of the journal 2000.

The very thought of Central Europe is not waning only because of this, though, but also because of the cultural leveling brought about by globalization, the strong influx of popular culture, and the influence of the mainstream. Péter Esterházy was right to say in a 2012 interview by György Vári that "we have become Eastern Europe again", then adding, "a sort of second-class Europe". The forgetting of Central Europe can be, however, interpreted within the framework of a much more far-reaching issue: it fits into the process of the ever-increasing

loss of prestige of culture (and especially high culture) taking place within social dimensions and consistently ongoing, closely linked to the aforementioned cultural leveling. In the interview quoted above, Esterházy was right to argue that it's not only Central Europe that we no longer have any knowledge of: "it's as if no subset of society were able to access their own culture anymore. This is partly because they have ceased to exist as a subset. They have become a contourless form of *petite bourgeoise*."

The thought of Central Europe has, however, became somewhat independent from political discourse, and became institutionalized as the key concept of the discipline of regional comparative literary studies – paradoxically just after the passing of the short-lived Central European renaissance.

Central European comparative literary studies in Hungary did not come into being without any preludes. The creation of the field was urged at the 1962 AILC-congress in Budapest, where Tibor Klaniczay pointed out that a research field based on cultural history and cultural typology of the region, different from the field of Slavic Studies, was made necessary exactly by the non-Slavic national literatures of the region, even though the issues and phenomena they were concerned with were similar to those in Slavic literatures. The institutionalization of such regional literary research came into being in 1986 with the establishment of the Central and Eastern European Department, headed by Endre Bojtár, within the Institute for Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences.

The pull of this newly established regional approach is clearly demonstrated by the fact that it played a part in the then ongoing reformation of the canon of secondary school literary education: it was the first time since 1945 that Central European literary works entered the curriculum (such as works by the Polish authors Adam Mickiewicz, Cyprian Kamil Norwid and Zygmunt Krasiński).

Endre Bojtár, the author of the Central European chapters of the reform textbooks, worked out the methodology of the newly institutionalized discipline, creating a flexible concept of the region as the foundation of his typology which could be used regardless of the tem-poral limits of a particular study: "East-Central Europe is, then, a type that can be compartmentalized internally (Central Europe, Eastern Europe, Southeastern Europe, the Balkans, the Baltics, etc.) and that has been more or less formed by similar historical circumstances" (Bojtár 2008, 13).

Based on the principles of this methodology and by attuning the standpoints of literary-aesthetic values and historical description with the principles of cultural-historical trends it will be possible to draw a relatively unified history of the region's literature (albeit one that is weighed down by interruptions, breaks and digressions).

In this literary history, thanks to the co-existing and at times conjoined literary movements, we can learn of the tendencies of changes as showcased in the most important works of the greatest authors. A great author will represent a certain tendency (or form, genre, style, idea, theme, etc.), which will allow for other similar authors belonging to other national literatures to be discussed alongside. The many iso-glosses of different dimensions that are formed through this comparative process can connect phenomena that stand a hundred years apart; the history of literature is thus the temporal sequence of sections circumscribed by iso-glosses of different viewpoints.

Endre Bojtár's monograph on East-Central European Enlightenment and Romanticism, Péter Krasztev's book on East-Central European symbolism (Krasztev 1994), Tamás Berkes' monograph (Berkes 1990) on the East-Central European grotesque and my own book on East-Central European catastrophism (Balogh 1993) have all been written with this methodology. Our Department fostered the creation of studies on the "realists of socialism" of the post-1945 era (Endre Bojtár), the Central European post-modern (Endre Bojtár, Péter Krasztev), considered the par excellence Central European phenomenon of the 20th century, and certain aspects of the Central European emigrant literature (Endre Bojtár, see also my study on the topic in *Rabul ejtett értelmek*).

The efficiency and relevance of this methodology can be debated, of course. Its unquestionable advantage is that it can provide a sort of bird's-eye view of a phenomenon, based on a relatively large scope of

material. Its disadvantage is the inevitable schematization or generalization derived from standardization, which might be countered by emphasizing the differences rather than the similarities of the national literatures in a comparative study.

Some don't believe in the use of regional typology because they think there are more differences than similarities between the region's literatures. György Spiró, in his monograph on Central and East European drama, emphasizes how the evolution of Polish drama in the studied period (ranging from the Enlightenment to Wyspiański's synthesis at the turn of the century) differs fundamentally from every other national literature in the region.

The validity of this methodology is also limited by the researcher's linguistic competence, as, strictly speaking, a literary historian can only make valid claims about literature written in his or her mother language. Other literatures – even when in command of extensive, thorough knowledge of a foreign language – can only be known to them as foreign ones.

Despite all this, a certain boom of the discipline based on the publications of recent years is quite striking: it seems to be an appealing possibility to compare the national viewpoint of literary history with another to see the examined phenomena in a different, often unusual light. What seemed to be unique in the context of national literature could turn out to be a particular variation of many similar phenomena, and vice-versa. We can see many examples of this in the most ambitious enterprise of recent decades, the four-volume work edited by John Neubauer and Marcel Cornis-Pope (2004–2010).[4] The joint project of this international team of authors stood up to the decades-long crisis of literary historiography by trying to find methodological solutions to the teleological tendency of conventional literary histories and the monologism brought forth by ideas of history embedded in grand narratives – and they succeeded in doing so. Neubauer and his team wanted to avoid even the illusion of an organic thread of

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[4] The two editors have published the work's methodological basis separately as well. See Cornis-Pope – Neubauer 2002.

evolution on which aspects of cultural history could be drawn upon.

Only the first of their four-volume textbook, dealing with the topic of time, has a chronological structure; the other three volumes present the spaces, institutions and personalities of literature following the methodology of Carlo Ginzburg's concept of microhistory (Ginzburg 1980). Out of all the new methodological approaches of historiography aiming to reform their discipline, microhistory was chosen as a key concept because the authors of this work believe in the authenticity and explanatory force of partial histories, while being sceptical towards the comprehensive histories and their over-arching historical generalizations.

The work's other key concept, used in a number of different ways, is the *node*, the "meeting point of different factors and tendencies" (Cornis-Pope – Neubauer 2002, 36), which can be spatial, topographical, temporal, generic, institutional or individual. In its primary meaning, the concept can be used to show analogous mechanisms and phenomena, and as such, is primarily useful for describing institutions and genres. (Based on the experience that the histories of national literatures in Central Europe progressed analogously, even if with some shifts in time, we can look at for example the language reform movements or the creation of the institution of the "national poet"). Through this concept, not only can parallels be revealed between certain tendencies or ideas and their reception in national literatures, but also the fact that these things did not happen in the process of autonomous progress. A further meaning of node is connected to reception, its ways of transmission-reception and of interpretation. In connection with this, two variants of reception (auto-reception and hetero-reception) are examined. The former is related to the rediscovery and reformation of one's own heritage (for example the discovery of ancient literature or folk poetry), while the latter means the borrowing of foreign ideas and forms.

In addition to all this, the third meaning of intersection according to Neubauer is questioning the first two meanings through deconstructing the preconceptions of these two distinctive, separately existing units. In this third meaning, "the meeting points become intra-nation-

al points of dispersion. Literary works, authors, regions, and ideas are more complex and multi-faceted than their reductive images within the national projects" (30). All phenomena that have been traditionally seen as a "disease" or as "decay", but are unarguably the parts of the native culture, belong to this category. Good examples would be Bartók's research on the roots of Hungarian folk music (Cornis-Pope – Neubauer 2002, 36), contesting former beliefs of its organic origins and pointing out that it was a hybrid of East-Central European music, or the discovery that the Rákóczi March, traditionally believed to be Hungarian, was in fact an amalgam of Arabic-Persian and Central European folk music and regional art music (30).

The exciting cultural-historical questions raised by the essays of these four volumes offer further possibilities for future research within regional comparative studies.

Translated by Orsolya Gyárfás

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