



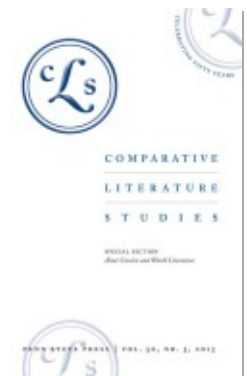
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LITERARY HISTORY IN TRANSNATIONAL MODE:
THE CHALLENGES OF WRITING A HISTORY OF
EAST-CENTRAL EUROPEAN LITERATURES

Marcel Cornis-Pope

As Priscilla Wald notes in her comments on *A New Literary History of America*, edited by Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors (2009), “Literary history is not at all a dead activity. Genres, like disciplines, are dynamic, as is the concept of the literary.” As she explains further, the guiding principle of *A New Literary History of America* is prismatic, assembling various disciplinary perspectives and offering a “carnival of style, voice, and topic.” The various chapters in it “function as individual vignettes, moments in time that readily form connections to other vignettes and help the reader see constellations among eras.”¹

The prismatic, multicultural, and to some extent multimedia model of literary history that Wald describes has been applied in a few recent histories, including *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*, edited by Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, Anxo Abuín Gonzalez, and César Domínguez, and *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* which I coedited with John Neubauer.² The latter work, published in four volumes between 2004 and 2010, attempts a comprehensive transnational study of the cultural and literary region that stretches from the Baltic countries to Bulgaria and Albania and from Ukraine and Moldova in the east to the Czech Republic in the west. Representing the joint work of more than 120 contributors from Europe, the United States, Canada, and Australia, this project, sponsored by the International Comparative Literature Association, is not a chronological narrative, but an experiment in writing literary history that acknowledges ruptures as well as transnational connections. Hence the project’s subtitle: *Conjunctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*.

Under the altered post-1989 conditions, most of scholars working in the field of literary and cultural studies have become increasingly mindful of the need to provide new ways to relate cultures by comparing, translating, and interfacing traditionally separate entities. Focusing on “cultural contacts” is even more important today than it was during the Cold War period: literary history must venture into new areas, acting as a corrective both to narrow ethnocentric treatments of culture and to the countertheories of globalism that reduce all cultures to a few predigested themes.

In the words of a recent reviewer, the task pursued by the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* was “to re-conceptualize literary traditions in the region by deconstructing national myths and focusing on common themes, thereby opening up perspectives which are routinely overlooked in traditional national literary histories.”³ Inspired initially by the comparative-intercultural approach to literary history outlined in Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon’s 1995 position paper and subsequently applied to the three-volume *Literary Cultures of Latin America* edited by Valdés and Djelal Kadir (2004), the literary history of East-Central Europe project went through several conceptualizations over a period of fifteen years.⁴ Some of these versions were tested in papers presented by the project directors and other contributors at MLA and ICLA conferences. These papers moved away from the national coverage model, still prevalent in certain language areas, seeking transnational and transcultural modes of articulation.

It is not hard to imagine why a work that proposed to cover two eventful centuries in the evolution of a score of literatures from several different language areas (the Baltics, the Balkans, Slavic Central Europe, and the non-Slavic countries of Moldova, Romania, Hungary, and Albania) periodically raised quasi-insurmountable problems over the course of its development. Moving beyond the boundaries of national literatures, seeking instead those “junctures” or “nodes” that allow for a cross-cultural interpretation, this history offended at times national sensitivities and challenged narrow aesthetic or text-oriented concerns (the project focuses on other media as well, such as theater, opera, and occasionally visual art, and discusses literature in a broad sociopolitical context). Thus, while theoretically subscribing to the project’s transnational approach, some early reviewers counted the pages each volume devoted to a specific national literature. On the flipside, the project received reviews that praised the transcultural treatment but objected to the parts that focused on local and intraregional cultures.

As Neubauer and I argued in a 2002 ACLS position paper, the approach chosen for this multivolume history rejected “the positivist and orthodox Marxist traditions that regard literature as a mimetic reflection of

an underlying ‘reality’; ‘internalist’ histories that isolate the discipline from the surrounding culture; . . . reductive national perspectives; and, last but not least, histories dominated by ‘grand narratives.’”⁵ In place of these approaches that have been traditionally part of the MLA’s logic of national and period divisions, the project foregrounds “crossings” and “nodes” that bring together various traditions, emphasizing the transnational, *hybrid* nature of cultural products in East-Central Europe. Building on the theoretical suggestions offered by Valdés and Hutcheon, the history is organized around five types of “nodes”: (1) important historical dates and genres in volume 1 (2004); (2) geographic nodes (multicultural cities, border areas, subregions, and the Danube corridor) in volume 2 (2006); (3) transcultural literary institutions (theater, folklore, universities, academies, multicultural magazines and journals, literary history as a genre) in volume 3 (2007); (4) real and imaginary figures (the national poet, figures of female identity, figures of others, figures of outlaws, figures of trauma, and figures of mediators) in volume 4 (2010); and (5) the region’s history beyond 1989, which is undertaken in an epilogue to volume 4. This nodal approach offers a flexible model for discussing literature in a continually shifting geopolitical and cultural environment such as that of East-Central Europe.

Volume 1 sets the broad contours of this project, focusing in the general introduction on the region’s identity and its conflicting mappings over time: from the notion of a pan-Germanic *Mitteleuropa* that relegated other ethnic traditions (Slavic, Romance, Hungarian, etc.) to the background, to the Soviet-inspired notion of Eastern Europe that disconnected the region from its traditional interactions with Central and Western Europe, and further to the mostly utopian concept of “Central Europe” that has been revived periodically (most recently in the 1980s) to differentiate the region from the czarist/Soviet and Ottoman imperial powers to the east and south. Against all these politically motivated terms, we chose the more neutral term “East-Central Europe” that had been introduced by Jenő Szűcs in “The Three Historical Regions of Europe” (1983).⁶ This reorientation allowed the literary history of East-Central Europe project to retrieve the complex cultural shifts and exchanges in an area that stretches beyond the region traditionally associated with Central Europe (Poland, western Romania, Hungary, Croatia, Slovenia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic), taking in the Baltic Countries, Bucovina, Moldavia, Ukraine, eastern Romania, and the Balkans.

The rest of Volume 1 explores the literatures of this region under temporal and generic categories that connect cultures across national boundaries while at the same time allowing for the possibility of experiencing similar events with different rhythms and even for different directions of development. Instead of seeking the “core” of a national or regional genre (the “essence” of

Polish lyric poetry or of the Romanian realist novel), the contributors focus on “boundary transgressions,” highlighting the emergence of new genres like reportage, the lyrical novel, the fictionalized autobiography, parody, and literary theory or examining literature’s transgression of its own boundaries in the subsection on the multimedia arts of opera and film.

Volume 2 offers multiethnic literary histories of cities, border areas, subregions, and the Danube corridor, emphasizing the role of these hybrid sites in diversifying and pluralizing national literatures. The literary histories of Riga, Plovdiv, Timișoara, and Budapest, or of Transylvania, and the Danube corridor reveal the fact that during the last two hundred years each of these sites provided a home for a variety of ethnic literary traditions next to the one now dominant within the national borders. Other examples of multiculturalism can be found in the large area associated with the Ashkenaz culture of the East-Central European Jewry, extending from the current German-Polish border, through the territory occupied by the former Austrian-Hungarian Empire, to the Pale of Settlement in czarist Russia, and southern Romania. Yet multi- or cross-culturalism can be found also within areas usually associated with a national paradigm, such as the present territory of Albania, which for one contributor is the epitome of the “hybrid soil of the Balkans,” encouraging the development of Albanian literature at the interface of Christianity and Islam.

The two remaining volumes of our history emphasize further the interplay of local, regional, and transnational identities, often against the background of lingering interethnic conflicts in East-Central Europe. Volume 3, subtitled *The Making and Remaking of Literary Institutions*, considers the impact of various literary institutions on the development of East-Central European literatures, while Volume 4, subtitled *Types and Stereotypes*, focuses on the representation of real and imaginary figures, from the figure of the national poet to figures of others. Many of these figures have experienced forms of territorial and cultural displacement, have historically been challenged by hegemonic groups (national minorities in general), or have been excluded from any existing territorial belonging through an arbitrary process of othering (the Romany).

Volume 4 ends with an epilogue that pursues the region’s history beyond 1989, the fifth and final nodal point of the literary history of East-Central Europe project. The narrative embedded in the epilogue, like much of the story preceding it, is a divided one. As several contributors to this epilogue point out, the collapse of the Iron Curtain freed East-Central European writers from censorship and allowed them to enter into closer contact with the larger world literary circuit, especially through the expansion of the European Community. But while writers could now travel freely, vanishing state

subsidies, the introduction of capitalist commercialism, and a generally lower interest in literature have thrown theaters, publishers, journals, and educational institutions into crisis. Some writers have responded to this challenge by promoting what Franca Sinopoli calls a “poetics of intercultural translation,” straddling languages, cultural experiences, and geographic boundaries.⁷

The collapse of the Eastern European system has also brought to the surface previously suppressed nationalistic, chauvinistic, and xenophobic attitudes; it was such attitudes that led to the disintegration of Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia. The war in the former Yugoslavia, in particular, produced new forms of exile in the 1990s. To a considerable extent, the history of literature in East-Central Europe has consisted in an alternation between exile and problematic returns, from the exodus of the great Polish romantics of the nineteenth century, to the writers who left Hungary in fear of the white terror in 1919, the refugees fleeing Hitler a couple decades later, and then the exiles fleeing Communism. After 1989, renewed antisemitism and violence against minorities, especially the Roma, forced a number of writers, among them the Nobel Prize winner Imre Kertész, to move full time or part time to the West. As John Neubauer and Zsuzsanna Borbála Török’s 2009 compendium on *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe* makes clear, the saga of exile is not yet over; it has merely assumed new modalities.⁸

In the current context of lingering interethnic conflicts in East-Central Europe, the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* challenges the isolation of national literatures, recontextualizing cultures from a larger regional perspective and recovering works, writers, and minority literatures that have been marginalized or ignored. The good news is that similar efforts to develop further the idea of a multicultural “Third Europe” as a buffer between Eastern and Western European countries with hegemonic ambitions and as a response to local ethnocentrism are being undertaken in East-Central Europe by several groups of scholars, some of whom (e.g., those associated with the University of Sofia, the Slovenian Institutum Studiorum Humanitatis, the Bucharest New Europe Institute, the Timișoara “Third Europe” group, and the Central European University in Budapest) are also discussed in the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*. For these scholars, East-Central Europe is not a fault line (as some Western thinkers continue to believe) but a “region of convergences,” a “Third Europe” of negotiation between east and west, central and peripheral, global and local.⁹ As Václav Havel argued in his keynote address at a conference on Europe’s new democracies held in July 2001, the new post-1989 world order should encourage the development of regional groupings, emphasizing simultaneously “decentralization and integration.”¹⁰

The editors of and contributors to *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* subscribe to Havel's concept of dynamic regionalism, treating East-Central Europe both as a multicenter and "turning plate" between two other major regions in Europe (Western Europe and Russian Eastern Europe, to follow Jenő Szűcs's mapping in "The Three Historical Regions of Europe"). The volume's coeditor, John Neubauer, conceives of literatures as interfaces rather than as competing entities and emphasizes the flow of information and cultural products across borders, physical and otherwise. Still, in his vision both the individual cultures that participate in this interaction and the larger regional entities maintain their identity, participating as coequal partners in a dynamic form of interculturality. His own intellectual biography has been a demonstration in creative interculturality, as the dramatic events of the second half of the twentieth century compelled him to move across cultures (he left Hungary in 1956, to escape persecution after the collapse of the anti-Communist uprising); he took that step encouraged also by his own interest in finding the rich area of translatability between cultures. My cultural education in Transylvania and the Banat regions included a creative contact with multiculturalism in various forms, some conflictual, others integrative. As in John's case, my transplantation to the United States has enhanced my awareness of global intercrossings. In spite of the difficulties encountered during the long process of elaboration, we remained faithful to this project because it afforded us that "hospitable space for the cultivation of multilingualism, polyglossia, the arts of cultural mediation, deep intercultural understanding and genuinely global consciousness" that Mary Louise Pratt writes about.¹¹ It is our hope that the *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* will offer strategies to other regionalist projects and to those who attempt to write comparative literary history in the post-1989, post-Cold War environment. The first volume of the aforementioned sister project on the comparative history of literatures in the Iberian Peninsula, was published in 2010 by John Benjamins. A similar project on Nordic literary cultures, edited by Steven P. Sondrup and Mark Sandberg, is in preparation.¹²

Stanislav Vincenz, a native of multicultural Galicia, warned in 1942 that "if Central Europe does not unite its forces into some kind of intellectual and cultural alliance," then "each one of its parts will by necessity become the dependency of a greater unit. Through rapprochement, however, each separate component can safeguard its individuality and can gather significant strength, moving in a direction different from the existing one."¹³ These words, voiced at a time of extreme crisis for the region, still ring true at the beginning of the third millennium.

Notes

1. Priscilla Ward and Mark Bauerlein, "Is This Literary History?," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1 Nov. 2008, <http://chronicle.com/article/Is-This-Literary-History-/48956>; Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors, eds., *A New Literary History of America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).
2. Fernando Cabo Aseguinolaza, Anxo Abuín Gonzalez, and César Domínguez, eds., *A Comparative History of Literatures in the Iberian Peninsula*, vol. 1 (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2010), and Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, eds., *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, 4 vols. (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004–2010).
3. Monika Baár, Review of *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, vols. 1–2, ed. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, *Comparative Critical Studies* 4.3 (2007): 468–69.
4. Mario J. Valdés and Linda Hutcheon, *Rethinking Literary History—Comparatively*, ACLS Occasional Paper 27 (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 1995), and Mario J. Valdés and Djelal Kadir, eds., *Literary Cultures of Latin America: A Comparative History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
5. Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer, *Towards a History of Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe: Theoretical Reflections*, ACLS Occasional Paper 52 (New York: American Council of Learned Societies, 2002), 1.
6. Jenő Szűcs, "The Three Historical Regions of Europe. An Outline," trans. Julianna Parti, in *Acta historica Academiae scientiarum hungaricae* 29.2–4 (1983): 131–84; repr. as *The Three Historical Regions of Europe: An Outline* (Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 1983).
7. Franca Sinopoli, "Migrazione/letteratura: Due proposte di indagine critica" ["Migration/Literature: Two Proposals for Critical Research"], 2003, <http://www.alef-fvg.it/immigrazione/temi/culture/2003/sinopoli.pdf>.
8. John Neubauer and Zsuzsanna Borbála Török, eds., *The Exile and Return of Writers from East-Central Europe: A Compendium* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2009).
9. Victor Neumann, *Tentația lui homoeuropaeus: Geneza spiritului modern în Europa centrală și de sud-est* [*The Temptation of Homo Europaeus: The Genesis of the Modern Spirit in Central and South-Eastern Europe*] (Bucharest: Editura științifică, 1991), 223.
10. Václav Havel, "Multitudinea de culori a lumii contemporane" ["The Multicolored Contemporary World"], speech delivered at "Europe's New Democracies," translated into Romanian by Mihaela Mihăescu, *Dilema* 9.437 (2001): 12–13.
11. Mary Louise Pratt, "Comparative Literature and Global Citizenship," in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 62.
12. Steven P. Sondrup and Mark Sandberg, eds., *A Comparative History of Nordic Literary Cultures* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, forthcoming).
13. Qtd. in Csaba G. Kiss, "Central European Writers About Central Europe: Introduction to a Non-Existent Book of Readings," in *In Search of Central Europe*, ed. George Schöpfli and Nancy Wood (Oxford, UK: Polity, 1989), 130.