

Regional Literary Histories (Regions, Centres and Peripheries)

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Résumé: *Nous avons choisi de discuter un sujet tournant autour des concepts de la région, du centre et de la périphérie, en essayant de louer les périphéries et les régions multi – ethniques. Comme les auteurs de l'histoire des littératures d'Europe de l'Est ont démontré, les œuvres littéraires, les auteurs, les régions et les idées sont plus complexes que les images réductrices établies par des projets nationaux. L'étude des littératures régionales comme appartenant aux zones qui peuvent jouer le rôle de centre et de périphérie en même temps ouvre de nouvelles horizons intra- et internationales.*

Keywords: *Marcel Cornis-Pope, John Neubauer, Gilles Deleuze, Immanuel Wallerstein, Itamar Even-Zohar*

The goal of a comparatist is to reconstruct intellectual climates, to draw a geographical outline of the exchanges that occur there, to follow the flow of ideas and models, to make an inventory of the context involving the literary works. Comparatists need to understand the way in which ideas are transformed into images and literary themes. They can refer to and make use of concepts such as region, centre and periphery¹. The concepts of centre and periphery can be applied to discuss several phenomena, e.g. space and distance, authority and power or economic force. Thus, the two terms facilitate the structuring of our social reality.

The historian and sociologist Immanuel Wallerstein² talks about the existence of a unified system of the modern world, at least on economic level, based upon the centre-periphery model. (As a result of the critique addressed to him, Wallerstein later extended his theory upon cultural phenomena too.) Within the global system there are three structural units: the centre, the periphery and the semi-periphery. The positioning of a state or a group in the system represents the key factor which will influence the politics of that unit. The division into regions/zones has to be understood as a structural one, yet usually it is also a spatial one. As criteria used to divide the different zones we have to take into account: the existing capital, the employment rate, the quantity of the technical knowledge, the intensity of the commerce, the lifestyle of the population and the force of the army. The institutions, the educational system, the political ideologies and the technology start to spread from the centre (core). Centre, periphery and semi-periphery are in a continuous interaction; their concepts cannot be separately perceived. A centre becomes *the* centre only related to the periphery and vice versa. The components expressed through them are contextual.

Thus, we can distinguish between components referring to distance, process, politics, economics and the socio-cultural domain. It is difficult to delimit these components as their place in space seems to be given, they are situated hierarchically. Communicational and commanding structures are usually directed from the centre towards the periphery. At the same time the law of hierarchical structuring means that peripheral regions can have their own centres, as well. The concepts of centre and periphery cannot be clearly defined; they are delimited in relation to each other, since there is a series of centres and peripheries of different values. As a consequence there are inner peripheries that refer to the hierarchy within a certain region and not to that on global level.

Regions³ play the role of an intermediary, they are at the intersection of the micro-economy represented by households, companies etc. and of the macro-economy through national and global economies. Regions are not merely passive blocks which resonate with developments of the global economy, nor are they autonomous economic units. Through their endogenous potential they build a regional field of production and innovation.

Classical peripheral regions are often situated at frontiers where spatial inequalities are more outspoken. Here delimitations and transgressions become just as important.

Up to the 17th century the Habsburg Empire, for example, had been closely related to the centre represented back then by Northern Italy, Germany and Flanders. Yet, once the main economic centres moved to the West, the old centres and semi-peripheries turned into peripheries themselves. As a result of the Thirty Years' War, economic exchange suffered on national level and the internal regional markets gained territory. The Habsburg Empire did not manage to impose itself on Great Britain and France as colonial power, and when at the beginning of the 18th century it lost Silesia and the Kingdom of the Netherlands, it had to expand east. The newly won territories took the place of the external colonies. The main difference between the classic colonies overseas and the internal ones lay in the formal equality of their citizens. Before the middle of the 19th century Hungary and Transylvania, the Banat, the southern territories and the Carpathian countries, Galicia and Bucovina had represented huge agricultural provinces. Yet, this did not necessarily mean that the industrial centres, that is the Austrian parts or Bohemia played the role of *the* centre *per se*, whereas the others would have been peripheries. Centre-periphery relations characterised industry in all regions. If we compared Hungary to Galicia and Bohemia we could observe different forms of the centre-periphery relationship. From political point of view Hungary played the leader's role, economically it was at the periphery. Bohemia was the economic centre; politically it was situated at the periphery. Galicia was both economically and politically at the periphery. Finally, the tensions between the economic force and political legitimacy grew to an extent that led to the fall of the Empire.

This debate can be introduced into the literary-cultural field as well, namely as an analysis of the perception of marginality created/reflected in literature. Literary regions extend over political and national barriers and are marked by several communities. In the Habsburg Empire, for example, the literatures of the German communities, they themselves with multiple identities, were closely connected to regions such as

Transylvania, the Banat, Bucovina, Galicia, Bohemia, Moravia or Slovakia. All the Germans abroad had their imperial citizenship in common. Yet, the appurtenance to a certain region or the delimitation of another led to an identity which was valid only within a specific historic context. Once with the change of the external phenomena, the afferent concepts had to change themselves as well.

The experience of the population from a particular region entered the literary texts, at least indirectly. It is important for us to explore the territory, the world where the author lived, the country s/he chose to write in, and to compare their work with those written by others in different languages in the same region. Such an approach could reverse our perspective related to the differences and similarities between the self and the other: what we considered as our own would not only be characteristic of us, and the foreigner would not be as strange as we had thought.

Within the regions cities played a huge role in cultural production because of their major creative potential based upon the ethnic and cultural diversity of the urban space. New innovations were born out of the continuous exchange between the different groups. Vienna, the capital city of the Habsburg Empire, represents an appropriate example from this point of view. Its status led to an influx from all over the Empire. Thus, the plurality of the Monarchy was reflected in its own centre.

In the 19th century Banat, at the periphery of the Habsburg Empire several regional intercultural centres got established. Here there lived many intellectual polyglots such as the lawyer Ferenc Stassik (1850-1917) who spoke and wrote in eight languages, and translated Rousseau;⁴ Peter Dankulov (1855-1914), translator and interpreter, who would also write literary texts both in Serbian and Hungarian. Dima Hadžić (Hadfy Döme) (1826-1909) in his turn spoke and wrote in five languages. In 1899, in the county of Torontal, at Becicherecul Mare, a journal was published in Romanian, Hungarian, German, Slovak and Serbian: *Amicul poporului din Torontal*, *Torontáli Népbárát*, *Torontaler Volksfreund*, *Torontalski Narodni Prijatelj*, *Torontálsky Priateľ* 'L'udu [*The Friend of the Folks in Tororntal*]. Its editor-in-chief, the polyglot Andor Marton employed editors for each language in part – the content of the issues however, was the same.⁵ In this context we can mention Elek (Alexe) Gozsdu (1849- 1919) from Timișoara of Romanian-Serbian descent who was a prosecutor of profession, and made his debut as a journalist and poet in 1870. He became a Hungarian playwright and writer of post-romantic novels such as *Köd* (*Ceața/The Fog* 1882), *Tantalus* (1886), symbolist poems inspired by Baudelaire, psychological short-stories influenced by Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, and theatre plays. He became renowned for his love letter correspondence with Anna Weisz, the wife of a merchant in Timișoara, they wrote to each other between 1906 and 1915.

The topic of periphery appears in his naturalist-symbolist novel *Köd* [*Ceața/The Fog*] inspired by Chekov. The plot which has a tragic outcome is based upon the crossing of two erotic triangles. In spite of their noble feelings the heroes are powerless; they are not capable of changing the evolution of the events into good. Not only their condition (unnecessary people) but also their names and the surrounding landscape are marked by the Chekhovian atmosphere. Martha – who is a good wife, somewhat liable

to sickness— dies of grief when she learns that her husband has been involved in a love affair with her stepsister, Olga. Ivan, an uneducated landlord who is in love with Olga, is incapable of expressing his feelings, and when he sees that Victor strives for Olga's fortune, he takes refuge in drinking. Olga feels unhappy being married to Victor. At the end Ivan kills him with an axe and commits suicide. The German doctor Raabe understands Ivan, and wants to make him think of noble deeds, without success, though. At the end, in front of the coroner, Raabe tries to draw an innocent picture of his friends by claiming that both of them were killed by a stranger. The heroes are victims of their own beliefs, cannot escape the limits of their own interpretations. We are not confronted with a determinist fatalism of the vulgar naturalist type, yet the biggest obstacle in the way of happiness is constituted by the incapability of the heroes to temper their desires. Victor does not consciously intend to harm either Martha or Olga; however, he is responsible for their misery. Ivan does not stay uneducated because he is stupid, but rather because he is lazy and feels ashamed to focus on the books recommended to him by Doctor Raabe. The main symbol of this lack of prospects, of the impossibility to change is the image of the fog in which the heroes wander about.

At the periphery of an empire, authors can establish contact with other centres more easily; they are more likely to encounter intercultural influences than those living in the centre. The periphery and the Diaspora can keep their freedom to a certain extent; they can be more open to other centres than the capital city. During the communist totalitarianism in Budapest – as well as in Bucharest – there could only be published poems which were accepted by the social-realist canon, whereas in Novi Sad or Paris there would appear neo-avant-garde Hungarian texts.

A city could and still can play the role of a node of cultural transmission. The 18th century Blaj was not important from the perspective of Hungarian literature, yet it built an essential cultural and literary Romanian nucleus which gathered Italian, German and Hungarian influence, revitalizing the whole Transylvanian spirituality. (Confront the monograph of Cinzia Franchi about the beginnings of the Romanian theatre in Transylvania at the Greek-Catholic seminar in Blaj.)⁶

The author Cinzia Franchi reveals the origins of the Romanian drama of the 18th century. She analyzes a tragedy about the death of Grigore Ghica, Voivode of Moldavia, in 1777, play which ends in an „actus bacchanalisticus”, thus changing into a tragi-comedy. The drama, called „a literary curiosity” contains director's notes written in Latin (*Occiduntur milites – Opprimitur Voda – Strangulatur*), episodes in Romanian, Hungarian, German, Roma, and silent sequences of the type of *commedia dell'arte*. Its multilingualism and fragmentary structure can be considered as an adaptation to the special multicultural character of the Transylvanian audience. A seventh part of the text consists of Hungarian poems (threnodies, pastorals). This fact implies that both the author and the audience were multilingual.

In the structuralist apprehension of Itamar Even-Zohar⁷ literature is a dynamic system in which there is a permanent exchange between centres and peripheries: certain themes, genres and canonized methods become ordinary having to leave the core of the canon behind, while other, peripheral and forgotten ones move from the margins

towards the core. This sort of dynamism can lead us to another perception of the complex ties between centres and peripheries, namely that of the rhizome with the transmission nodes at Deleuze-Guattari.⁸ The concept of transmission nodes appears at Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer⁹ as well. They use the term 'node' to denote three different aspects of the centre-periphery relationship. Temporal nodes are meant to impose a regional, spatial perspective upon the diachronic national narratives. National literary projects went through similar stages, yet not at the same time or rate. However, the homologous structures met due to the resemblance of the national processes which in their turn originated from ideas, schemes and programmes imported from abroad. Thus, national processes can be regarded as interdependent.

Nodes as transmission points emphasize the receptive process which can take up autobiographical or inter-textual modes. With letters, journals, travelogues and other documents about the self which incorporate pieces of information about foreign literatures we have to deal with an autobiographic reception. When we talk about the regional sharing of diverse literary forms and movements, an inter-textual reception is at work. One can differentiate between *auto*- and *hetero*-reception, between the revitalization, reconstruction and manipulation of older cultural texts of our own and the import of ideas and forms from abroad. This could, but did not necessarily have to weaken national cohesion. Implementing ideas from abroad to help and revitalize the nation played an essential part in shaping national identity.

The different modes of reception imply the existence of two separate identities, the independence of which is the guarantee of the exchange between them. The third interpretation of the concept of the 'node' questions the previous ones by deconstructing national identities. This perspective underlines the internal differences and shows how the apparently consistent structure turns out to be a hybrid one. The facts which the national literary projects had tried to ignore or which they labelled as contaminated or corrupt appear here as indigenous. Thus, the meeting points become points of intra-national dispersion.

As the authors of the history of East-European literatures have proved to us, literary works, authors, regions and ideas are more complex than the reductive images established by national projects. Studying regional literatures as belonging to zones that can play the role of the centre and periphery at the same time opens new intra- and international horizons.

NOTES

¹ cf. Daniel-Henri Pageaux. *Literatura generală și comparată [General and Comparative Literature]*, Polirom, Iași, 2000.

² cf. Antweiler, Christoph: „Immanuel Wallerstein (1930). Alle Entwicklung ist eingebettet im kapitalistischen Welt-system.” in **E+Z – Entwicklung und Zusammenarbeit**, Nr.9, sept.1999, 253-255. [*Immanuel Wallerstein (1930). All Development is Embedded in the Capitalist World-System*].

³ cf. Mihály Vilma *Zur Identitätskrise – Ein interkultureller Vergleich. Mit besonderer Berücksichtigung von Joseph Roth und Liviu Rebreanu*, Status, Szeklerburg, 2012, p. 93-99. [*On Identity Crisis – An Intercultural Comparison. With a Special Insight into the Works of Joseph Roth and Liviu Rebreanu*].

- ⁴ Németh Ferenc: *A nagybecskereki sajtó története (1849-1918)*. [A History of the Media in Becicherecul Mare (1849-1918)], Forum, Novi Sad, 2004, 173.
- ⁵ Idem, p. 132.
- ⁶ Franchi, Cinzia: *Occisio Gregorii in Moldavia vodae tragedice expressa*. Az erdélyi román iskoladráma kezdetei és forrásai. [The Origins and Beginnings of the Romanian School Drama in Transylvania] Pallas–Akadémia, Miercurea Ciuc, 1997. (The drama was first mentioned by László Gáldi in 1933 and edited by Lucian Drimba in 1964.) The custom of theatre representations in Blaj, confrimed since 1754 was linked to Bishop Grigore Maior.
- ⁷ Itamar Even-Zohar. *Polysystem Studies*= POETICS TODAY International Journal for Theory and Analysis of Literature and Communication. Volume 11, number 1 (1990).
- ⁸ Gil Deleuze- Felix Guattari. The Concept of the Rhizome. in. *A Thousand Plateaus*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987 (<http://danm.ucsc.edu/~dustin/library/deleuzeguattarirrhizome.pdf>, 15. 10. 2013).
- ⁹ Cornis-Pope, Marcel, Neubauer, John 2002. *Towards a History of the Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe: Theoretical Reflections*. ACLS OCCASIONAL PAPER, No. 52 (http://www.acls.org/publications/op/52_literary_cultures_in_east_central_europe.pdf, 15.10.2013).

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