

Toward the Median Context: Comparative Approaches to Central European Literature

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing interest in world literature beyond the Western canon, the nations of post-socialist Central Europe remain a blind spot in Western literary criticism and theory. While Franz Kafka inspired Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's concept of "minor literature," their distinction between "minor" and "major" leaves intact the prevalent assumption that "small literatures" are inherently "national," while the literatures and languages of the larger world powers are essentially universal. Yet the multicultural terrain of Central Europe offers an ideal context for comparative cultural criticism, since these literatures were forced to negotiate at every stage of their development with neighbouring cultures. This makes Central Europe an exemplary site of cultural translation, a concept originally derived from anthropological research, which is not only about making connections but also about asserting difference and finding a balance between assimilation and resistance. Milan Kundera's insistence on the need for a "median context" in world literature emphasizes the importance of studying Central European writers in a regional rather than national setting. One case study introduced here is a comparison of two writers who fall between Slovak and Hungarian literature: Sandor Márai and Gejza Vámoš. Both Márai and Vámoš were native Hungarian speakers, but Vámoš was born in present-day Hungary and chose to write in Slovak, while Márai was a native of today's Slovakia and became a major Hungarian modernist author. Both of these authors evoke the mixed cultures and languages of prewar Central Europe, but Márai affirms his essentially Hungarian identity, while Vámoš embraces the multilingualism of the region. Such a comparative approach to the median context of Central European fiction by specialists in the region may increase its visibility within world literature studies.

Central Europe. Cultural Translation. Minor Literature. Interliterary Communities. Sandor Marai. Gejza Vamos.

Despite the growing academic interest in world literature, writing in the less commonly spoken European languages has received relatively little critical attention. In particular, the region known during the Cold War era as the Eastern Bloc remains a blind spot in Western literary criticism and theory, even since the fall of Communism

in 1989. These nations – including the former Czechoslovakia (now the Czech and Slovak republics), Hungary, and Poland – have defined their boundaries not through territory but through culture, especially their little-known languages and literatures. While this has been a means of self-preservation, it has prevented these nations from seeing the common elements in their histories. As the Habsburg Empire had done in the nineteenth century, the Communist ideology provided a unifying force, albeit an imposed one, that reached beyond national, cultural and linguistic differences. For most people in the West, these societies were part of an alien “East”, but many of their writers felt themselves part of the West European tradition, from which they had been cut off by political developments beyond their control. It was only in the 1980s that writers such as Milan Kundera reclaimed the half-forgotten geographical category of “Central Europe” to emphasize the region’s deep historical ties to the West, but also the importance of its shared cultural identity despite differences in language. Since the expansion of the European Union has erased the borders between East and West, Central Europe offers an ideal context for comparative criticism, showing the interconnections of these literatures rather than the “smallness” of their literary traditions, and allowing the region to serve as a paradigm for the concept of a transnational world literature.

In the nineteenth century, the writers of Central Europe rediscovered or recreated a glorious past for their nations, offering cultural strength to compensate for political vulnerability. Translations of world literary classics were essential to the national movements, since they demonstrated that languages such as Czech, Polish and Hungarian were capable of sustaining independent literary traditions. Yet these literatures were forced to negotiate at every stage of their development with neighbouring cultures. Vladimír Macura has explained the importance of translation as a direct reaction against the dominance of the German language: “Translation was not seen as passive submission to cultural values from abroad; on the contrary, it was viewed as an active, even aggressive act, an appropriation of foreign cultural values.” (68) This makes Central Europe an exemplary site of *cultural translation*, a concept originally derived from anthropological research, which has usually been applied to the negotiation of meaning between two widely divergent societies, or as Peter Burke has explained, “what happens in cultural encounters when each side tries to make sense of the actions of the other.” (8) Burke has also described cultural translation as “a double process of decontextualization and recontextualization, first reaching out to appropriate something alien and then domesticating it.” As he suggests, “this approach may usefully be extended to cultural exchange within Europe.” (10) For smaller or “peripheral” nations, translation was at times the means to “catch[ing] up with Western Europe,” or a tool of “cultural nationalism,” in order to strengthen the literary range of the local vernacular. (19) Unlike literary translation, the interlingual transfer of words and meaning, cultural translation is a process of negotiating identity and difference, in which one’s own being is defined by alienation from oneself and by the existence of others.

Tina Steiner has taken the concept of cultural translation to examine the works of African émigré writers in the West:

What the writers do in their narratives is to translate between cultures’ selectiveness, their inclusive/exclusive practices, their assimilatory pressures exerted upon individuals, whether they are considered as ‘insiders’ or ‘outsiders.’ This brings me to the central assumption that ‘cultural translation’ stands for the re-framing of meanings of cultural categories in the narratives. (9)

In their attempt to connect their African postcolonial identities with the Anglophone culture in which they have created their fictional literary worlds, the writers in Steiner’s study “demonstrate through these instances where communication happens across seemingly unbridgeable boundaries that people might be more resourceful and embracing of diversity than society at large seems to expect... The writers thus engage creatively with issues of intercultural practice in the context of globalization and migration.” (12) As she concludes, “the authors examined conceive of translation not in the sense of a rendering of linguistic and cultural equivalents into another language, but rather as a vehicle for transforming language in order to re-vision and express a reality where two (or more) languages and cultures coexist and cohere into new voices.” (156) While African literature may seem rather far removed from the cultural setting of Central Europe, David Chioni Moore has pointed out “how extraordinarily postcolonial the societies of the former Eastern Bloc are,” and “how extraordinarily little attention has been paid to this fact, at least in these terms.” (114) The use of language to express a multicultural reality, and the attempt to cross cultural boundaries, are recurrent themes among Central European writers from the early twentieth century to the present, and in this sense “post-imperial” literature can be seen as a close parallel to the postcolonial. The “cultural exchange” between the domestic and the alien had a deep impact on European modernism through the work of Franz Kafka. Inspired by his reading of Czech and Yiddish literature, Kafka created a “character sketch of the literature of small peoples” in his diary, in which he outlines three attributes of these literatures: “liveliness,” “less constraint” (including the use of “minor themes”), and “popularity” (which includes a “connection with politics.”) (148–49) In a letter to Max Brod, Kafka later alluded to the “three impossibilities” facing Jewish writers in German: “the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in German, the impossibility of writing differently [...] thus it was a literature impossible from all sides.” (289) One of Kafka’s earliest translators into Czech was Pavel Eisner, who linked Kafka’s work to its Prague setting, from which it is for most critics today inseparable. In his book *Franz Kafka and Prague* (1950), Eisner states that in Prague “the German Jew lived without a people and against the people; the compact majority stood against him; it really left him alone, but felt him to be foreign in a profound sense, to be unwanted in every respect, and to be the carrier and promoter of a hostile principle.” (45) In his 1936 essay “On Untranslatable Things” (“O věcech nepřeložitelných”), he points out that both German and Czech have elements that cannot be expressed in the other language. Yet Eisner himself, as a translator from both Czech to German, and German to Czech, was a living argument against the “impossibility” of a Jewish writer participating in Czech literary life. He is remembered today by Czech readers for *A Cathedral and a Fortress* (*Chrám i tvrz*, 1946), in which he celebrates the richness of the Czech language. While for the Czech

reader, he glorified language as a fortress guarding the nation, in his essay for Western readers, he portrayed it as a ghetto wall keeping national communities apart.

Kafka's concept of small literatures has influenced the study of world literature, particularly through its most influential interpretation, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's study *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (*Kafka: Pour une littérature mineure*, 1975, trans. 1986). These French theorists assert that Kafka was caught between the "four languages" of Austrian-Jewish Prague (German, Czech, Yiddish, and Hebrew), cut off from the national territory of his native German, and unable to connect with the Czech territory surrounding him, much less with a Jewish homeland. Kafka's attempt to escape this "deterritorialization" results in a "minor literature," according to Deleuze and Guattari: "the literature which a minority constructs within a major language." This is characterized by "language" with "a high coefficient of deterritorialization," a "cramped space" which forces everything "to connect immediately to politics," and "a collective enunciation." (16–17) As Réda Bensmaïa proposes in his introduction to the English translation of Deleuze and Guattari's *Kafka*: "Kafka appears as the initiator of a new literary continent: a continent where reading and writing open up new perspectives, break ground for new avenues of thought, and above all, wipe out the tracks of an old topography of mind and thought." (xiv) They view literature as producing "an active solidarity" through political engagement: "if the writer is in the margins or completely outside his or her fragile community, this situation allows the writer all the more the possibility to express another possible community and to forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility." (17) Despite these political claims, their concept of "minor literature" is highly philosophical and abstract. Their distinction between "minor" and "major" leaves intact the prevalent assumption that "small literatures" are inherently "national," while the literatures of the larger powers are essentially universal.

The cultural implications of translation were analysed within Central Europe itself, where translation studies emerged as a significant field of research through Jiří Levý's pioneering work *The Art of Translation* (*Umění překlada*, 1963), which was translated into German and Russian (although an English translation did not appear until 2011). The foundations of Levý's work go back to the traditions of Czech structuralism developed by the interwar Prague Linguistic Circle, and his theories were further developed after his death by Anton Popovič and other Slovak colleagues based in Nitra. While much of Levý's analysis focuses specifically on poetry and drama, one section entitled "Translation in National Culture and World Literature" examines the cultural impact of translation more generally: "The universalism of modern literatures is not based on a common cultural property, but on the exchange of cultural properties, on the development of communication between separate cultural territories." (215) In Czechoslovakia, the need for cultural translation between national groups was always present, more than was the case in nations with more stable and homogenous linguistic identities. Zuzana Jettmarová has suggested that Levý was one of the first theorists to point out the function of translation in "contribut[ing] to the convergence or divergence of the two cultures in contact." She calls the Czech National Revival "a perfect example of contradictory parallel norms and functions;

while translations from German aided the distancing of the two cultures by applying the domesticating method, translations from Slavic languages/cultures sought cultural convergence, supporting the idea of Pan-Slavism.” (36) Central European cultural translation performed the same function in the interwar period, in which writers diverged from their forced relationship with Austro-Hungarian culture and converged with newly independent national identities.

The Slovak theorist Dionýz Ďurišin, who was one of the first critics to propose a systematic theory of world literature, also took into account the issue of translation. In *Theory of Literary Comparatistics* (1984), Ďurišin suggests the concept of “interliterary communities” for national literatures, giving the examples of “the Danube region, or the most recently formulated conception of the literatures of eastern Europe.” (274–75) For both general and specific literary analysis, he suggests:

it is insufficient to have only the context of the national literature as the starting point and that of world literature as the final aim of the study. Between these two points there exist intermediate degrees, [without which] not only is it impossible to acquire a universal knowledge of the literary phenomenon, but no understanding of world literature is possible either. (287)

While his own work was based primarily on Slovak-Russian literary relations, Ďurišin was initially skeptical of the idea of considering the neighbouring socialist countries, particularly non-Slavic Hungary, as an “interliterary community”: “I see the community of eastern European literatures to be merely a tentative project.” (288) After the Velvet Revolution of 1989, however, he clearly accepted the concept of Central Europe; his final works were two collected volumes on the interliterary, one of which was *The Interliterary Centrism of Central European Literatures* (*Medziliterárny centrismus stredoeurópskych literatúr*, 1998). As César Domínguez has explained, Ďurišin’s theory “aims to explain the unfolding of literature as a history of tensions arising from the integration and differentiation functions between the extremes of national and world literature.” (102) This echo of Jiří Levý’s translation theory is not coincidental, since for Ďurišin, literary translation plays, as do the “interliterary communities,” a significant “intermediary function” between the national and world context. Almost simultaneously with Ďurišin’s *Theory of Literary Comparatistics*, Milan Kundera brought widespread critical attention to the term “Central Europe” with his essay “A Kidnapped West/The Tragedy of Central Europe” (1984), in which he claims: “If [a nation’s] identity is threatened with extinction, cultural life grows correspondingly more intense, more important, until culture itself becomes the living value around which all people rally.” (97) In another essay from the 1980s, “Three Contexts of Art: From Nation to World,” Milan Kundera suggests that the ideal way to look at works is not in the contexts of national or world literature but in the “median” regional context, of which Central Europe is one example. While he never published these essays in book form, he revives both concepts in his essay “Die Weltliteratur,” from his collection *The Curtain* (*Le Rideau*, 2005): “Between the *large context* of the world and the *small context* of the nation, a middle step might be imagined: say, a median context.” For Czech literature, this is not the Slavic context; Kundera states that “while there is a *linguistic* unity among the Slavic nations, there is no Slavic *culture*, no Slavic

world [...]” Russia “was far off, another world”; the median context for Czechs (as well as Poles, Hungarians and even Austrians) is Central Europe, a group of nations brought “together, at different times, in different configurations, and within shifting, never definitive, borders.” (43–46) Kundera, like Deleuze and Guattari, uses Kafka’s cultural and linguistic dilemma as a cornerstone of their arguments, but while the French theorists suggest that Kafka attempted to liberate himself from these limitations, the Czech novelist suggests that it is precisely the smallness of this “realm” that gives it greatness. His concept of a “median context” for Central European literature is close to Ďurišin’s “interliterary community”, although from the other side of the Cold War ideological divide.

Many theorists have used Deleuze and Guattari’s “minor literature” theory to examine other languages and historical contexts, but it has rarely been used for Czech or any other Central European literature. One exception is Pascale Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* (*La république mondiale des lettres*, 1999, trans. 2004), which attempts to historicize the relations of power, both political and literary, between the large and small nations. In her chapter on “the small literatures,” Casanova offers a useful critique of Deleuze and Guattari, who “impose a modern opinion upon a writer from the past who did not share it,” and “create a political and critical catchword – ‘minor literatures’ – out of whole cloth and freely attribute it to him.” (204) Casanova quotes from Kundera’s writings on “small nations,” although she does not directly connect Kafka to Kundera through their shared connection to Prague. More importantly, Casanova compares a broader range of writers *within* the smaller literatures and draws a direct connection between “small languages” and translation. All writers in these languages become “translated men,” she suggests (deriving this term from Salman Rushdie), because they are forced to choose “between translation into a literary language that cuts them off from their compatriots [...] and retreat into a small language that condemns them to invisibility or else to a purely national literary existence.” (257) The “most autonomous” of these writers are also “internal translators” for their own nations, however, because “they import, directly by means of translation or indirectly through their own work, the innovations of literary modernity.” (327) Casanova provides a context that takes at least some of the historical shifts of Central Europe, from Herderian Romanticism to post-Communism, into account and offers a new direction for the study of its novelists through the concept of cultural (or in her terms, “internal”) translation.

The experience of “deterritorialization” was not limited to Kafka’s Prague, but was described by writers from across Central Europe. This can be seen in the novels of Sándor Márai and Gejza Vámoš, two writers caught between Hungarian and Slovak identity who can be seen as “translated men” in Casanova’s terms. Both Márai and Vámoš died in exile (the former in California, the latter in Brazil), but both of them had been uprooted decades earlier from their birthplaces in the multilingual Austro-Hungarian Empire. Márai, the first translator of Kafka’s works into Hungarian, was born in the city known as Kassa by Hungarians and Košice by Slovaks, which he portrays in his fictionalized memoir, *Confessions of a Bourgeois* (*Egy polgár vallomásai*, 1934). Although he originally thought of a literary career in German, he

decided to write in his native Hungarian. Vámoš was from a middle-class Jewish family and his first language was also Hungarian, but after completing high school in Slovakia and studying medicine in Prague, he decided to use Slovak as his literary language. Vámoš's second novel, *The Broken Branch* (*Odlomená haluz*, 1934), is the most significant portrayal of Jewish identity in Slovak fiction. The main character's transformation from a traditional Jew to a modern, “rational” Slovak parallels the author's attempts to make a place for himself in Slovak literature. Although these writers are not usually brought together in a single academic context (since Hungarian lies outside the field of Slavic studies), a comparative analysis of their work reveals underlying parallels. Neither Márai's *Confessions of a Bourgeois* nor Vámoš's *The Broken Branch* have been translated into English, the key sign of a work's success in world literature (although several of Márai's other novels have been translated into English, and *Confessions* has been translated into such languages as French and even Turkish). However, both authors perform an act of cultural translation in evoking interethnic relations within the Habsburg Empire.

Márai's *Confessions of a Bourgeois* portrays prewar Kassa/Košice, a multilingual milieu of Hungarians and Slovaks, Neolog (Reform) and Orthodox Jews. The narrator compares the two Jewish families in the street: the Neolog family was assimilated but aloof from the other neighbours, while he felt more connected with the Orthodox Jews, despite their religious rituals, “Galician” clothing and especially “their strange and confused accent, mysteriously mixed with Yiddish, German, and Hungarian words.” (13) This “communication across seemingly unbridgeable boundaries” (in Steiner's terms) is also reflected in the interactions between the other groups: “the Slovaks from the surroundings hardly spoke any Hungarian. The maid servants also spoke some hybrid Slovak/Hungarian; the language of conversation in the local high society was officially Hungarian [...] The city's mood was Hungarian, but after dinner in shirtsleeves and in slippers, even the gentlemen turned to German.” (16) Everyone in this social context, regardless of linguistic or religious identity, had to communicate across cultural borders. Peter Hajdu has compared Márai's perceptions of the Slovaks with that of Kálmán Mikszáth, another Hungarian from Slovakia, whose works sometimes feature “a Hungarian sentence spoken by a person competent in the language from words spoken in Slovak and ‘translated’ by the narrator [...] The translation, the linguistic character of the utterance, might be connected with the problem of identity.” (532) However, as Hajdu suggests, Márai does not idealize this interaction: “World War I and the dismemberment of Hungary... radically transformed the attitude toward the Slovaks and the memory of having lived in coexistence with them.” (536) After Košice became part of the new state of Czechoslovakia, Márai felt deeply alienated from it and moved to Budapest. Writing after the loss of his native city to a foreign state, Márai evokes its multicultural past to assert his Hungarian identity.

Hungarians had an additional aspect of “deterritorialization,” not only in Slovakia, where they were a minority, but also as speakers of the only non-Indo-European language in Central Europe. In his postwar *Memoir of Hungary*, (*Föld, Föld!*, 1972, literally “Land! Land!” trans. 1996), Márai explains that for Hungarian writers, trans-

lation served the function of enriching an isolated culture:

Hungarian, which, even after a thousand years of language practice in Europe, still thirstily imbibed foreign nutriments [...] A Czech writer, if he felt the lack of an expression while composing, reached absently into the vest pocket of neighboring Russian, Polish or Southern Slav dialects and promptly found what was missing. But where could Hungarian writers turn? They fed this anemic intellectual metabolism by reading. (135–36)

Thus, according to Márai, “Every Hungarian writer who knew a Western language felt duty bound to translate... They knew that translating is like an undertaking in which someone deciphers a secret writing, a *code*.” (145–46) Márai’s practice of cultural translation shows that while Central Europe might be a “median context” for his work, the relationships between neighbouring groups do not function as an “interliterary community.”

After World War II, Márai moved to the West, but he remained almost unknown even though he lived there in exile for over four decades. In a remarkable revival, his works were rediscovered in translation after his death, beginning with the international success of his novel, *Embers* (*A gyertyák csonkig égnek*, 1942, literally “The Candles Burn Down to the End,” trans. 2000), a simple tale of two former friends reminiscing about their lives in the vanished Habsburg Empire. While it was long considered one of Márai’s minor works by Hungarian critics, *Embers* was translated into a number of languages, and through its success, he has paradoxically become the only Slovak-born novelist to be widely known abroad. Coming from the same socio-historical context of provincial Slovakia, Gejza Vámoš rejected both Hungarian and Jewish identity, but also refused the newly dominant Czech identity. Both of his novels were published in Prague rather than Bratislava: his first novel *Atoms of God* (*Atómy Boha*, 1928) was criticized for its use of a Slovak heavily influenced by Czech, while *The Broken Branch* portrays a polyglot Jewish community speaking not only Slovak but Yiddish, German and Hungarian. By making the choice to write in Slovak, Vámoš refutes Deleuze and Guattari’s assumption that the only possible language for Jewish writers in Czechoslovakia was German. According to Zuzana Malinovská-Šalamonová:

[having] lived in a rewarding climate, open to a happy multilingualism [...] [Vámoš] does not want to lock himself up in a language prison... He dreams utopically of a universal language that would be the ideal language of a reunified and happy humanity [...] Even if he rejected his Jewish and Hungarian past and asserted his status as a Slovak writer, Vámoš [...] was only happy in polyglossia. The presence of a great number of expressions in Hungarian, German, Czech, Hebrew and Yiddish, in Russian, in English, in Latin, not to mention French, proves this. (146–47)

Atoms of God is set mostly in Prague and only briefly alludes to its protagonist’s Slovak background, but in a revised version of the novel published in 1934, Vámoš added a new section describing the Czechs as “a thrifty, practical nation without material or spiritual excess,” and criticizes Czech, which although a “rich, cultural language, always runs along the same tracks. It doesn’t allow, especially not in a conversation, grotesque linguistic wildness, full of bizarreness and surprising humor. It doesn’t allow one to form one’s own words, strange, often monstrous, often delicious

distortions and phrases.” (51–52) The author’s use of Slovak is mixed with Czech vocabulary and its use of “delicious distortions” in its grammar suggests a lingering Hungarian influence. Thus as a Hungarian Jew, Vámoš creates a “minor literature” within a language that was minor even within Czechoslovakia.

In *The Broken Branch*, the protagonist rejects his orthodox Jewish upbringing and opts for assimilation to the majority Slovak culture. The first chapter of Part Two of *The Broken Branch*, entitled “The Jew of the North and the South,” compares Hungarian Jews with their co-religionists in the “Upper Lands” (Slovakia) and Galicia, with a strikingly different perspective from Márai’s *Confessions*. According to this polemical analysis, the Hungarian Jew has successfully integrated with the local people, to the benefit of both sides. The key to this is the acceptance of the Hungarian language, which “flows from the lips, as if heavy, fat clods of soil were falling at a slow tempo into a big, rumbling pot.” The Hungarian peasant “took away his Jew’s spluttering jargon, he even took away his German, and gave him his own, heavy, rumbling, but expressive, fluid language.” However, even the Hungarian Jew looked with “confusion and horror” at the Slovak Jew (Vámoš uses the disparaging term “Tót zsidó”) “a commercial, nasty brute who deserves all of the contempt from his southern co-religionist.” (125–28) This critical portrayal by someone from within the Jewish community, at a time when anti-Semitism was rapidly rising in neighbouring Germany, was seen by his Jewish compatriots as a betrayal. However, the fact that Vámoš chose to engage with Jewish themes (previously invisible in Slovak literature) reveals a deep irony beneath this call for assimilation. As Dagmar Roberts has explained, Vámoš himself “was perceived as non-Slovak in origin and spirit. His contacts with the Hungarian literary tradition on the one hand, and with Czech literature on the other, undermined his position in Slovak literature.” (140) His own choice to write in Slovak directly contradicts his approval of Hungarian-Jewish assimilation, allowing him (in Bensmaïa’s terms) to “forge the means for another consciousness and another sensibility.” Unfortunately, Central Europe was no longer receptive to “happy multilingualism,” and five years later, Vámoš fled his homeland forever. Despite their differences, both Vámoš and Márai show greater adaptability to the conundrum of Central European identity than did Franz Kafka, and their complex linguistic and cultural negotiations are better expressed through the “recontextualization” of cultural translation than through the “reterritorialization” of minor literature. Central European writers no longer confront political oppression or exile, but the cultural identity of their small nations still faces pressure, now from the apparently more benevolent forces of globalization, and cultural translation has a key role to play in accommodating convergence while preserving difference. The “median context” of Central Europe offers a useful approach for specialists within the region and elsewhere to increase the visibility of these national literatures in the international field of world literature studies.

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