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**Europe: a Culture on the World's Edge,  
or Who's for the Role of the Loser?**

Perhaps Europe as a single entity actually does not exist after all. Of course, there are attempts to create it as such—among others, in its cultural aspect. Yet it is doubtful that at present these attempts are close to success—if the word "success" could at all be used in this context. Having put aside global pop trash and a few examples of generally required classics, we have to admit that an Irishman and an Albanian dwell in completely different cultural spaces and show no intention of uniting them. But this is the case not only for such geographically distant pairs. It applies also to a Frenchman and a German, much more spatially proximate and outwardly more culturally active. True, between them there is noticeably more in common. However, their cultural spaces still largely are more distinct than overlapping. Moreover, even within the borders of a shared state like Switzerland the cultural spaces of the French-speaking west and the German-speaking center and east are in many ways radically different.

A question immediately begs itself: so what is wrong about that? To which extent this multiplicity of cultural spaces and orientations actually marginalizes Europe in its imaginary opposition against the Rest of the World?

This appears to be rather a philosophical question. Do complexity and heterogeneity in the cultural dimension actually lose against unification and simplification? And how should one understand "losing"? Who scores the goals and who misses here? At which level do cultural phenomena compete with one another? In which way is this manifested in culture: through the victory of "mass" over "high"? But how could victory be possible if there was no war? That is, the adversaries in fact have never met, for they play in different leagues. There is even a strong suspicion that they (to take the athletic competition analogy to its logical conclusion) even play different sports.

In the meantime, having not found an answer, I will permit myself one more question: where does it come from, this heterogeneity and cultural fragmentation of Europe? And therefore yet one more: to which extent is it susceptible to change? To which extent could Europe be "leveled" and homogenized? The ominousness of the latter word seems to point to the absurdity of the process that stands behind it.

Many years ago (all of nineteen, almost two decades) I first had an opportunity to live for a while in what one might call the very heart of Old Europe, adding to the future list of my intimate cities Munich, Innsbruck, Venice, Ravenna, and Florence. A consequence of my three-month sojourn among those landscapes was the idea I later spelled out in my essay "Introduction to Geography": the European person was created by mountains and forests. I must have meant

the boundedness and concreteness of each separately considered place and its belonging to a certain composition that is larger in scale. This, I believed then, strongly impacts the sense of form—in its European manifestation.

However, in addition to geography, history also took Europe and seriously worked it over. It is history that divided Europe at least in three: into Western, Eastern, and East Central. As for the location of the latter there exist several hypotheses, among which the following strikes me as the most convincing: between the East (Russia, post-Soviet space) and the West (the so-called Old Europe) there lies something that is an east for the West and a west for the East. And precisely in this belt one finds the countries whose population speaks East Central European languages, and their writers consequently write in those languages their works.

And if in cultural processes there truly are losers and outsiders, it is first of all them. If wars are possible within culture, it is they who most often lost them. If one speaks about cultural products in terms of import/export, it is precisely in East Central Europe that the former strikingly outweighs the latter. So strikingly in fact that involuntarily a salutary suspicion arises: perhaps this outsider status is in reality a secret leadership? But before considering what it perhaps could consist in, let us try to clarify what caused it; in other words: why are the East Central Europeans the cultural losers of contemporary world?

Culture—even in its broadest understanding—was and remains language-centered. Language, language, and language again grants culture sense and endurance. Even if this language in front of our very eyes becomes poorer, shrivels, and its vocabulary shrinks. We all now bear witness to this shrinkage. However, despite the ever-increasing weighty presence in cultural messages of the visual (pictorial), the verbal still maintains a defining semantic charge. Even when on an iPhone we tap on "like" or "repost," we confirm our dependence on the verbal. We still want to *speak*, we want to *say* something.

Meanwhile the literary messages, despite the declining numbers of people capable of reading and comprehending literary works, preserve a certain exclusivity. And it is clear why: of all the means of expression they are the closest to thought.

Therefore, I propose that we focus here on literature (the outsider and simultaneously the secret leader of the cultural space) and also on its entirely peculiar situation in East Central Europe.

Does a distinct, separate East Central European literature actually exist? Where is it? Who embodies it today, in the twenty-first century?

These questions were posed to me from Berlin, and it is entirely unsurprising that they originated there. Of all the metropolises of the Occident this one is the most concerned with what is located to its east.

My answer to my Berlin-based interlocutor is fairly simple.

The twenty-first century so far has not brought any radical changes on the global literary stage. For one cannot consider, for instance, the eastern expansion of the EU such a change. All right, the EU did expand—what happened, happened. The writers of East Central Europe did not start writing somehow differently because of this—in some other languages, for example.

That is, East Central European literature today is personified through the same languages as in the twentieth century: Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Serbian, Slovene, Lithuanian, and so forth. Croatian has officially been added, having in the past been considered tightly linked with Serbian. My Berlin-based interlocutor counted in the entire East Central European belt from Estonia to Albania seventeen languages. By my count, they are sixteen, for I consider Moldovan only a somewhat sovietized version of Romanian.

However, in the above-drawn belt there are also minority languages: German, Russian, Rusyn, Romani, the remnants of Yiddish, some other not-quite-languages, sub-languages, unrecognized children: Kashubian, Prussian, Moravian, the language of the Azov Greeks, Karaim, Sorbian—Karl-Markus Gauss would be able to compile a much longer list.

In the meantime, let us note: in each of these languages, both the sixteen "main" ones and all the "additional" ones at any moment the final line of a literary work of genius could be completed. But who would learn about this? James Joyce is a global literary icon first and foremost because his writing is non-commercial and difficult to read. But who would Joyce be if he wrote not in English but, say, in Albanian? Would anyone in this world know about Joyce? Would others believe the Albanians when they asserted that their Joyce was a genius?

So—the authors who write in all the above-mentioned and other languages of East Central Europe, as well as their texts: this is what comprises East Central European literature. But if there are so many languages in it, and they are at times so different from one another, what unites them? What allows us to speak about it as a distinct phenomenon?

First and foremost it is the socio-historic shared fate and experience: twentieth-century revolutions, dictator regimes, Nazi occupation, the communist era, violence and suppression as its constituent element, feeling oneself not a subject but an object of the historical game in the opposition between Russia and the West. Suffice it to recall one of the simplest definitions of East Central Europe as the territory "between the Germans and the Russians," or, to quote the mysterious Polish geopolitical strategist who wrote in the 1930s under the pseudonym Wiktor Szyrma (i.e., "Victor the Screen"), as "the junction of nations located between the German and

Russian ethnic spaces." Naturally, this location between two imperialisms did not promise anything good. "Central European fear historically oscillates between two worries: the Germans are coming; the Russians are coming"—these words once came to me in one of my essays about "the most surprising part of the world."

Let us add to this the well-established censorship pressure and the forcing of writers to become collaborators. A peculiar East Central European feeling of unfreedom and suspense.

Let us add, besides the external (occupiers and aggressors, "Russians" and "Germans") also the internal factors: mutual phobias, claims, and lingua-cultural limitations: Romanian/Hungarian, Polish/Ukrainian, Czech/Hungarian, Serbian/Croatian, Hungarian/Slovak, etc.—a binary pairing of hatreds. In our field of vision there are many striking examples. The Poles who did not allow Ukrainians admission to universities during the interwar period. The Ukrainians who answered them by destroying Polish cultural heritage in the postwar era. The Romanians who blocked the self-determination of the Hungarian and German minorities. It is scary even to stay silent about the Serbs, Croats, and Bosnians. Sometimes it seems that East Central Europe is the field of established primacy of the ethnic over the ethical. That is, we have an enormously long history of mutual cultural annihilation—which, by the way, is still not entirely history. It is still to a significant extent a phenomenon of the present, it is today.

Let us add to this "bouquet," if a word like this could even be used here, the tragedy of the Jews. East Central Europe has been recognized as the principal arena of the Holocaust. The role was played in this by representatives of different East Central European nations and ethnic groups has been and remains an extraordinarily complex and neglected question which pertains directly to their future fate. That, for example, the Ukrainians keep failing to get on the path to greater social recovery in my view is explained also by the fact that to this day we have not truly worked through the topic of our collaboration, in both directions—with Hitler and with Stalin. And *this* continues to devour us, and without our concerted efforts it will never let go of us.

All these repressions, taboos, skeletons in the closet, and still untold stories mean, among other things, also an unheard of—and so far unspent—literary potential. In their own "unsuccessful" countries, the writers of East Central Europe confront that for the sake of which their more western colleagues have to travel to Somalia or Bolivia.

Still, the above-listed symptoms of socio-historical commonality are but one of the prerequisites of another commonality, a purely aesthetic one. It interests us here the most.

A kindred linguistic consciousness—this is what truly characterizes the writers from this "most surprising part of the world."

The literatures of East Central Europe are created in "*minor languages*," which due to their lack of influence in the world, their marginal status and low functional applicability were

forced to go deep inside themselves, to intensify, since extensive development was impossible for them; they accumulated inside themselves their own melancholy, irony, and refinement, almost imperceptible from the outside and impossible to render in translation. They—the languages, and therefore the literatures created in them—became a "thing-in-itself."

An East Central European writer (and in this part of the world this word weighted with responsibility is still used much more frequently than the neutral and western "author") in fact tells his or her story not for the sake of telling a story, but to use a language about which the world outside could not care less, so much so that this language must constantly be rescued, and its vitality proven—at the very least to itself. Language stops being only a material or an instrument, that is, a means. It becomes—sorry for the sudden lofty tone—the sense of existence, fragile and eternally endangered. The greater and deeper your use of it, the more proofs there are that it will survive. Let us put here instead of the word "proofs" the word "illusions," and we will be even closer to truth.

In its own way, East Central European literature is autistic and autarchic, and at the same time—within the pan-European, let alone global dimension—it is doomed to exoticism, difficulty to understand, and thus a lack of commercial potential. If the latter were to equal lack of success, we would have the answer to the question as to who is truly in the loss here.

My Spanish publisher lives in Barcelona; his press maintains two publishing programs, in Spanish and in Catalan. They say that the size of the latter in recent years has noticeably diminished—probably due to these same commercial reasons. But the publisher himself is a Catalan intellectual; he lectures on world literature at the university only in Catalan.

"In which language should we publish you?" he asked me once, at the very beginning of our relationship. Without thinking about this for too long I answered curtly, "Naturally, in Spanish." Fortunately I had in me enough restraint not to say out loud what I thought then, "Who on earth needs these translations into Catalan? Why this *minor language*?" For Spanish is so global, this is not only Spain, but also Mexico, Peru, Argentina, other fairytale lands which I have never visited, plus a substantial chunk of the United States. I was almost breathless from such a prospect.

The publisher understood me and nodded to signify agreement—although somehow very sadly. So sadly, that I immediately felt really ashamed. I am ashamed to this day about the sudden imperial chauvinism I displayed there. I will never again offend any language in this world.

I have recalled this episode to draw an analogy. To write in one of the languages of East Central Europe is like writing in Catalan. Or Gaelic or Welsh. Or even in Romansh—in one of its five dialects. It is like writing in one of the dialects of Schwyzerdütsch—for example, Bernese. There is nothing impossible about this—in each of the languages mentioned here hundreds of books are not only being written but also published. To each of them Europe grants a right to exist. And not only the right—it also supports this possibility with subsidies. Thank God that Europe still has sources for paying out such subsidies. Or even if it does not, it still pretends that it does.

To write in one of the languages of East Central Europe is like surviving on subsidies. The literature of East Central Europe—if not entirely, then in its defining features—is subsidy-driven. It is like contemporary opera, new music, or free jazz. "What is the difference between a rock concert and a contemporary avant-garde concert?" asks me Peter Conradin Zumthor, a genius Swiss drummer. I shrug. "At a rock concert," says Peter, "the public knows by name all the performers. At a contemporary avant-garde concert, the performers know by name the entire public." We laugh, although slightly too loudly. "And what's the difference," asks Peter again, "between punk and jazz?" I shrug once more, for such are the rules of the game. "Punk is when they use three chords to play for the audience of a thousand," he says. "And jazz is when they use a thousand chords to play for the audience of three."

This is also how things are with the literature of East Central Europe. Its authors play a thousand chords in their own languages and know by name or at least by face all their readers. This is a literature of low print runs and several encouragement-providing prizes, including the Nobel. This is the literature of sinecures and stipends. From all these features it follows that this is an ideal literature. It exists for the sake of language and believes that the language exists for its, literature's sake.

This is how they stay together—mutually justifying their existence in form of various subsidy-granting agencies, the sum total of which could, for humor's sake, be perhaps called God.

Now I still would need to consider the relations between the East Central European literary periphery and the metropolises. How appropriate would it be to consider them in a postcolonial context?

In my view, if yes, this is a different kind of postcoloniality.

"Classically" postcolonial literary specimens (originating from, say, India, Indochina, Africa, or Latin America) are created in *global (large) languages*. The problems of translation, understanding, and readerly penetration have innumerable more chances for resolution. In other

words, a novel originally created in English or Spanish objectively, independently from the quality of the text itself, enjoys much greater chances. Writers' careers are often aided by a move to one of the former imperial centers. And therefore, by writing in London about Bangladesh or Kenya, in Paris about Algiers or Dakar, in Madrid about Macondo or Manila, in Lisbon about Mozambique.

With this the migrant authors do not lose in the least their own primary identities. A French-speaking Vietnamese still remains a Vietnamese writer, although from then on he is listed in reference materials as a "French-Vietnamese" writer. The reason is perhaps that multicultural openness is in a sense a one-way street. It is characteristic only of representatives of Western civilization. The "multicultural components" themselves, in other words, the postcolonial migrants, usually do not display a great openness to the foreign and, as befalls the "exotic," close upon themselves. Not to raise unnecessary passions about this, let me give you some, shall we say benign, examples of such discrepancy. Germans (and certainly not only they) are very fond of Thai restaurants, but it is hard to imagine a Thai family from Munich whose staple food is sausages and cabbage. Some of us are fond of Pakistani hashish, but it is hard to imagine Pakistani migrants who drink schnapps and chase it with beer.

Multiculturalism, then, turned out to be a value only for a Western person. Perhaps because the Western person, like a sponge, wants to absorb everything, each experience, each contact with the world's diversity. Its multiculturalism is an unconscious attempt to swallow the world, to rebuild the greatness of the empire at least on the level of one's own self.

East Central European authors do not enjoy such a privilege of retaining their identity in spite of giving up (or, if you wish, being liberated from) their own "minor language." Language is one of the very foundations of their identity. Changing language to a "major" one, you need to be aware of the consequences: you destroy on the inside an essential part of your very self. That is, certainly no one could forbid you from exchanging one of the "minor" languages to one of the "global" ones (as Milan Kundera, for example, did in his time), but you must be ready to face attacks and boycotts on the occasion of your desertion. Fleeing from your native language, you will not necessarily remain yourself in a foreign one.

In any case, one can firmly exclude desertion in a different direction: to our own postcolonial center, which is Moscow. It is impossible to imagine one of us—from Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, or Poland—moving to Moscow and starting to write in Russian there, while simultaneously preserving his or her cultural identity.

But if not Moscow, then perhaps Vienna? This former capital, a large cultural metropolis, about which most of us retain much more positive impressions? Could Vienna these days attract those born in its former colonies?

For now, I would leave this question open. A very special place of Austrian literature in the twentieth-century canon is undeniable. As for the present century, here serious doubts can arise. Still, a special "Austrian format" of the German language allows many East Central Europeans to this day to see Austrian authors as colleagues in their linguistic misfortune. Perhaps Austrian German could be seen as a peculiar communicative bridgehead? That is, as a special language, transitional between the "minor" and the "major" ones?

The last question from Berlin, as befits the last question, pertains to the future. Would East Central European literature exist in twenty years? I too earlier tried seeking grounds for such a dramatic finale. That is, I often ask myself this very question.

But if we admit the possibility of disappearance of certain literatures, then we must ask a broader question: would there be literature at all? And not only those East Central European dwarves—would the Chinese one exist? Indian? Anglophone? Spanish-language one?

I am convinced that the answer is yes. East Central European literature will exist at least as long as the languages of East Central Europe exist. It will hold on for a considerably long time also thanks to the innate human laziness towards mastering foreign languages—while still remaining just as unsuccessful, lacking mass demand, untranslatable, hard to understand, unknown, and—hermetically perfect.

In other words, to suffer a defeat is an incredibly important mission. In your marginal refusal to disappear, in your somewhat spasmodic clinging to each of the words of your only possible "minor language" you as it were provide an example to all the cultural victors and prove: if even this *Verlierer* does not surrender, then literature in general will not disappear anywhere—no matter what some might say about its inevitable end.

Translated by Vitaly Chernetsky