

Perspectives and Problems of Regional Literary Histories

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Abstract:

The article discusses the demand for renewal of the methodological approaches and narrative forms of national literary history in historical scholarship. With the recent growth of globalization and migration, the expansion of the European Union and with strong criticism of the meta-narratives of national literature, the regional trend of modelling and researching literary histories has become increasingly relevant, especially for small literatures. We can see the attempts of many literary scholars to change the customary progressive ethnocentric model of historical narrative and to search for more contemporary forms of cultural identity, based on heterogeneous multicultural grounds. The intensive democratization processes in post-communist societies inevitably encourage their literary historians to move from closed national literary models to open pluralistic comparative cultural models. Several examples of this regional trend are discussed in the article. How important and promising are regional memory-building efforts for individual historians of small literatures? And what problems do historians of such research face? The report seeks concrete answers to these questions. But the questions don't stop there.

Keywords: Literary History, National Literary History, East-Central Region, Baltic Cultural Identity

The need to reconstruct national literary histories

An intense full-scale revival of historic memory that commenced together with the 1990 restoration of the independent state of Lithuania and the end of Soviet censorship still remains strong there. This revival of historic memory is characteristic of the wider post-Soviet region. The Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore (ILLF), where I work with its programme activities, focuses on the history of national literature research, although we hear increasingly more criticism expressed towards it. A good example of this criticism is found in *Rethinking Literary History* – the selection of articles by famous scholars issued by the Oxford University Press in 2002. In this book, the authors interpret the writing of national literary histories as a rudimentary phenomenon stemming from Romanticist culture that is present in the currently uniting Europe and in the entire world of globalization: “In globalized culture like that of the start of the twenty-first century, one clear alternative would be to move from a single national to a comparative transnational focus” (Hutcheon, 2002, p. 26).

After a lot of criticism to the positivist historicism and meta-narrative of national literature (Roland Barthes “Histoire ou littérature?” (1963), Rene Wellek “The Fall of Literary History” (1973), David Perkins *Is Literary History Possible?* (1992)) the second problem with writing literary history is to update the methodology in general connecting it with a critique of progressivist history and with postmodernist history theoretics (Fredric Jameson, H. R. Jauss, Paul Ricoeur, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man). As Paul de Man paradoxically claimed in his article “Reading and History” (1986, 54-73), the present of literature denies its past although cannot be imagined without it. As was shown in the book *Writing Literary History: Selected Perspectives from Central Europe* (Dolimar, Juvan, 2006) especially in post-communist society, it is necessary to overcome the old habits of writing the history of literature in order to prove one “objective” truth, whether it is sought from a Marxist or a patriotic position, and to undertake the analysis of a complicated (“heteroglossia”) history. Productive and conceptual discussions on this issue were held at conferences organized by the Lithuanian Literature and Folklore Institute and those of the World Lithuanian Philology Community.¹

¹ *Priklausomybės metų (1940-1990) lietuvių visuomenė: pasipriešinimas ir/ar prisitaikymas* (Lithuanian society during the years of dependence (1940-1990): Resistance and/or Con-

European literature and East-Central regional

During the Cold War the ICLA-initiated general project of European literature strengthening the European identity as a set of national differences.¹ In a collection of essays *Cosmopolitanism and the Postnational: Literature and the New Europe* (Domínguez, D'haen, 2015) was given the analysis of contemporary European integration and migration and suggested a new connection between post-nationalism and cosmopolitanism notions.

But with the geopolitical conflict between West and East, that the Russian revanchist war in Ukraine 2022 (started from 2014) renewed again, regional literary studies and particularly the post-communist and post-Soviet regional trend of modelling and researching literary histories has become increasingly relevant.

It is no wonder that after the collapse of the USSR the largest work of contemporary regional comparative literature, *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th centuries* (Cornis-Pope, Neubauer 2004-2010) was based on Fernand Braudel's three-volume *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XVe-XVIIIe siècle* (1967), and on other books written by the Annales school of French historians (Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre, Jacques le Goff), who updated the methodology and devoted a lot of research to the Mediterranean region. Braudel called his Mediterranean research "comparative," transforming its meaning in two main respects: *in its reception* as it is a dialectic hermeneutic movement between past and present and *in its interdisciplinarity* (by which traditional comparative literature could be transformed into cultural

formity), Vol. 2, 1996; *Lituanistika XXI amžiaus išvakarėse* (Lithuanian linguistics on the threshold of the 21st century) Vol. 2, 1997; *Lituanistika pasaulyje šiandien: darbai ir problemos* (Lithuanian studies in the world today: Works and problems), Vol. 3, 1998. A. Jurgutienė Globalization Challenges the National Literary History, *Senoji Lietuvos literatūra: istorijos rašymo horizontai*, kn. 18, Lietuvių literatūros ir tautosakos institutas, 2005, p. 30-43.

¹ *Expressionism as an International Literary Phenomenon*, Ulrich Weisstein, Ed., 1973; *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages*, Anna Balakian, Ed., 1982; *Le tournant du siècle des humanités 1760-1820: Les Genres en vers des humanités au romantisme*. Ed György M Vajda, 1982; *Les avant-gardes littéraires au XXe siècle: Histoire*, Jean Weisgerber, Ed., 1984; *Les avant-gardes littéraires au XXe siècle: Théorie*. Jean Weisgerber, Ed. 1984; *European-Language Writing in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Albert Gerard, t.2, Ed. 1986; *L'époque de la renaissance (1400-1600). L'aveugement de l'esprit nouveau (1400-1480)*. Tibor Klaniczay, Eva Kushner, Andre Stegmann, Eds. 1987; *Romantic Irony*. Frederick Garber, Ed., 1988, etc.

study, fastening the close relations of literary texts to the cultural, social, economic and geopolitical context). In such influence of history which “move from this life as *it is lived* to how *it is told*” a “comparative” literary history had to die or to change, consolidating the most important two concepts – dialogue of literature and its diversity (“heteroglossia”) as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak explained in her book *Death of a Discipline* (2003).

History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe: Junctures and Disjunctures in the 19th and 20th centuries (4 volumes have been written by 120 authors of various nationalities) provide us with a postmodern deconstruction of separate national literatures and its remodelling into the wider regional cultural model of East-Central Europe. Editors and publishers of these books invoked Benedict Anderson’s term “imagined communities” and did not believe that the *imagined* East-Central European cultural model they offered would be somewhat better and more objective than the former *imagined* ethnocentric cultural models, but hoped that their intention – to pursue encouraging the openness of national culture as the most important at the moment when the Cold War ended. In these books of post-communist regional literary history, the history of national conflicts in the East-Central European region is transformed into a new communicative structure of cultures that cannot be separated from each other and in such a way a new regional cultural identity is being developed. The Lithuanian cultural paradigm in them is represented in articles by Violeta Kelertas, Tomas Venclova, Arturas Tereškinas, Audronė Girdzijauskaitė.

How regional cultural identity is able to extinguish conflicts between neighbouring countries is demonstrated well by the impact of Czesław Miłosz’s books on readers. The famous Polish writer Czesław Miłosz could not imagine his cultural identity without either Poland or Lithuania and created the multicultural profile of a “Native Europe” (or *Rodzinna Europa*). It was exactly Miłosz’s charismatic personality and his books – which were abundantly translated in Lithuania that contributed to the country regaining its independence in 1990 and educated Lithuanians as well as Poles in a new national awareness – to forget the military conflict, when the Polish military had occupied the old Lithuanian capital of Vilnius in 1919 and instead together create a common future in the European Union. Miłosz believed that it is very important to discover a new identity model for your own culture that would transcend the border of classical nationalism and would refuse the extremeness of “pure nationality”: “If the examples of nineteenth-

century patriotism are suffering a crisis, a new identity is sought. Thus, my family myths and my constant focus on Polish-Lithuanian duality probably means the same – I am looking for an identity beyond the classical borders of nationalism as it is described in the handbook of professor Chrzanowski” (Miłosz, 1995, p. 353). Miłosz’s books about common cultural memory and regional multicultural identity encouraged Polish and Lithuanian literary historians to move from closed national literary models to open pluralistic comparative cultural models and to regional literary history, and to intensive democratization processes in their post-communist societies.

Moving in this direction new interpretations of the multiculturalism of old Lithuanian literature of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (in the 16th-18th centuries) were published. No wonder that Lithuanian literature from the 19th century was steadily generating national values and marginalizing everything non-Lithuanian, sometimes calling it a culture of strangers, others, or just enemies. For example, all former disputes regarding the national identity of Polish Lithuanian poet Adam Mickiewicz, the leader of the Vilnius school of Romanticism should lose their meaning as now the only obvious and specific fact of his work is becoming clear; i.e. its multiculturalism that does not privilege even one national principle of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. The multicultural aspect of research should help reveal moments of encounter and communication of national cultures rather better than just their moments of hostility.

Regional comparative literary studies were successfully extended in Association of Lithuanian Comparative Literature (ALCL) conferences and publications¹ and in the book *Grotesque Revisited: Grotesque and Satire in the Post/Modern Literature of Central and Eastern Europe* (Katkus, 2013). ALCL is a member of the European Society of Comparative Literature (ESCL/SELC) and participates in its conferences, and other activities.

¹ Lithuanian Comparative Literature Association published a series of books in their *Acta litteraria comparativa: The Barbarian in European Literature and Culture* (2008), *Cultural and Literary Reflection* (2009), *European Landscape Transformations: Own and Other Meetings* (2010-2011), *Identity Search in Baltic literatures* (2012–2013).

Baltic region

It is important to note, that after the end of the Cold War scholars of the Lithuanian Literature and Folklore Institute, the Under Tuglas Literature Centre of the Estonian Academy of Science, Tartu University, and the Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art of the University of Latvia have been presenting joint memory research of the Balts and organizing biannual conferences as well as launching collective works.¹ Baltic memory is an ambiguous regional concept that encompasses different meanings which initiate different directions of research: ethnographic, geographic cultural and historic political. If we perceive the Balts as the image of “three sisters’ (Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia) living under USSR occupation or after it, the research should be directed *towards historic political memory*. Baltic regional identity has been clearly manifested at the end of the ninth decade during so-called Singing Revolution and with its most important action – the Baltic Way (during “perestroika” in 1989), when people were holding hands all the way from Vilnius to Tallinn to express their joint will to be released from the Soviet Union. It is exactly this direction that has a very rich tradition in Soviet Baltic literary criticism as well and becomes very important in post-Soviet literary studies: Silvestras Gaižiūnas’ *Baltic Faust and European literature* (Baltų Faustas ir Europos literatūra, 2002), *Scandinavian Literatures and Baltic Contexts* (Skandinavų literatūros ir baltiškieji kontekstai, 2009), Laura Laurušaitė’s *Between nostalgia and mimicry: Lithuanian and Latvian emigrants’ postwar novels* (Tarp nostalgijos ir mimikrijos: lietuvių ir latvių pokario išėivijos romanai, 2015); Benedikt Kalnačs’ *20th Century Baltic Drama: Postcolonial Narratives, Decolonial Options* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2016), Vigmantas Butkus’ *Literary Baltic Studies: Concept, Development, Perspectives* (Literatūrinė baltistika: Samprata, raida, perspektyvos, 2018), etc². The prospect of comparative research of Baltic cultures can no longer

¹ *We Have Something in Common: The Baltic Memory* (2007), *Back to Baltic Memory: Lost and Found in Literature 1940-1968* (2008), *Baltic Memory: Process of Modernization in Lithuanian, Latvian and Estonian Literature of the Soviet Period* (2011), *Interlitteraria: The Changing Baltics* (2015), *300 Baltic writers: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania: a reference guide to authors and their works* (2009).

² The Lithuanian Comparative Literature Association published a series of books in their *Acta litteraria comparativa*: *The Barbarian in European Literature and Culture* (2008), *Vilnius: Cultural and Literary Reflection* (2009), *European Landscape Transformations: Our Own and Other Meetings* (2010-2011), *Identity Search in Baltic Literatures* (2012-2013).

be imagined without the innovations of postcolonial, ideological criticism, and new historicism that are more widely introduced in the collective monograph *Baltic Postcolonialism* (Kelertas, 2006).

Baltic regional identity has been discussed in the emigré academic Association for the Advancement of Baltic Studies (AABS, founded in 1967, in the United States) that organized international conferences on Baltic Studies and has supported the publication of *The Journal of Baltic Studies* and several books (Ziedonis, Puhvel, Silbajoris, Valgema 1973). It brought together emigrée scholars from the Baltic countries occupied by Soviet Russia, and they were from all disciplines and stages in their careers worldwide sharing an interest in exploring the Baltic region from multiple perspectives and fields of research.

Today conferences on Baltic Studies in Europe (CBSE) in cooperation with AABS at Vytautas Magnus University (Lithuania) have been going on for over fifteen years. For the Baltic region to be situated on the edge of Europe meant to experience tragic historical consequences. The Baltic region's historical experiences and authentic voice are crucial in creating a common European moral and cultural map and they should be heard and known.

Regional literary histories also have one important practical motivation. Miłosz explained the desire for this new regional identification ("Native Realm", East-Central Europe) from his pragmatic "American point of view" that he gained after emigrating from Soviet Poland to the United States where he taught literature at the University of California, Berkeley. He proposed that the myth of the "Native Realm" (East-Central Europe) is very important for daily life purposes and practical cultural education of others and for studies in various Western universities. It might help the West to learn more about something that recently seemed so totally alien to them; because East-central Europe was thought to be mostly "barbaric", "unknown", and "new". Today, Baltic cultural centers have been established in many Western universities (Krakow, Prague, Tbilisi, Seattle, etc.), have joint activity programs and hold regular international conferences. In addition to academic and educational activities, they help the diaspora to preserve its national identity. According to Miłosz, creation of this regional concept helps resist cultural globalization and levelling down, not only national isolation: "I was always resisting the fact that I was remade into a Western European or American writer" (1997, 345).

The problems

We have indicated how important and promising regional memory-building efforts are for post-communist and post-Soviet societies. Now we have to briefly discuss what problems historians of such research face. Regional literature research is severely criticised in three cases. Most of them were described in Endre Bojtár's article, "Pitfalls in Writing a Regional Literary History of East-Central Europe" (2007, 419-427).

The first problem, which we have mentioned before, is how "objective" can the study of regional literary history as well as national literary histories be?

The second doubt concerning regional literary histories relates to the impossibility of unequivocally defining a region. As many scholarly discussions have shown, it is impossible to find a single principle that would objectively divide regional literature. Most reliance is placed on traditional regional names, but they are also historically variable. A good example of it is the East-Central European Region. After the First World War, this region was conceptualized by Friedrich Naumann as *Mitteleuropa*, including Germany with its rich Yiddish cultures. During the Cold War and after the collapse of the USSR the East-Central Region took on another meaning. To my mind, Czesław Miłosz gave the most conceptual description of it.¹ But the context of its interpretations is much broader created by the writers H.C. Artmann, Péter Esterházy, Danilo Kiš, György Konrád, Claudio Magris, Adam Michnik, Milan Kundera, Václav Havel, Tomas Venclova, and Joseph Brodsky in the discussion in Budapest in 1989 and in the publications.² It is obvious that the writers during the Cold war were encouraged to do so by a

¹ The identity of the "Native Realm" as described by Miłosz contained a number of features: 1) it is a region of nations that historically was under constant threat by German and Russian military forces and national oppression, and acted as an "object of sale" in politics, 2) a writer had an especially high social status in them, 3) their literature focused on politics, moral metaphysical, and philosophical problems, 4) its works were influenced by Western borrowings by originally reworking them beyond recognition, 5) the form of creating was the "lack of form", 6) it is a region that experienced the evanescence of the Jews who use to reside there in great numbers, 7) and finally, these are the mostly inter-mixed languages and cultures that can understand each other the best (Miłosz, Fiut 2003, 369-382).

² Milan Kundera, *The Tragedy of Central Europe* (1984), Joseph Brodsky (1985), Czesław Miłosz (1964).

very important internal cultural and psychological intention to search for a European difference of their own “Native Europe” (East-Central Europe) that would coincide neither with Western Europe, nor with Russia. Many of them agreed that the most important and unique feature of the culture of this region is the struggle of peoples against German and Russian hegemonic threats, extending from the Baltic countries in the north to Ukraine and Macedonia in the south. But of course, no common concept should cover the internal contradictions of region identity and all cultural differences. For example, many East-Central Europe nations’ “elite” literature is mostly Western, while the other part of it and sociocultural life is Eastern.

We can see how in modern region research the opposition “our own vs. outlandish” could not be legitimate. By abandoning the strict opposition of our own versus foreign in regional literary historical studies, we will be able to reduce the inherited military tensions between the peoples. However, they must be separated as strictly as possible from any ideological imperialist indoctrination and propaganda that flourished during the Cold War in Soviet comparative literature on the friendship of the peoples of the USSR and was revived as a key argument during Russia's armed attack on Ukraine.

So regional literature research complicated the traditional ethnocentric research of national literature, but the significance of it is not abandoned. Regional multicultural literary studies are “destroying” insularity and purity rather than a nationality treatment of literature by focusing on the *local/global* or *glocal*. This conception was spread by Jüri Talvet at the international comparativist conferences at the University of Tartu and in the journal *Interlitteraria*. Therefore, *the glocal* conception is not accidentally in the title of ICLA congress “Re-Imagining Literatures of the World: Global and Local, Main Streams and Margins” (Tbilisi, 24-29 July 2022) and in other contemporary comparative literature books.

And the third biggest problem is with the experts of this regional literature. In practice regional comparative studies has a serious lack of experts, who know all the languages and literatures of the region well enough. Therefore, it is not surprising that regional literature research is most often carried out by large groups of scholars and most often written in English. But I hope if regional research will be in demand, the qualifications of the experts will also have to grow. There are quite a few of them even now: Czesław Miłosz, Endre Bojtár, Violeta Kelertas, Marco Juvan, Jüri Talvet, Benedikt Kalnačs, John Neubauer, Epp Annus, Guntis Šmidchens, etc.

Conclusion

Such an awakening of variously profiled regional literary studies may be motivated only by the peculiarities of self-awareness of modern literature historians and critics. Therefore, I want to present the conclusion of this article in the form of questions. Would separate nations like to apply themselves to the general regional model of culture as well as the ethnocentric one? Could regional recollection development efforts be interesting and important to individuals of separate nations and their societies? Can they have political implications and can they be important subjects of study for students in Western universities? Only positive answers to these questions will open a further perspective for regional comparative literature research.

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