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Europe: Culture on the edge of the world,
or who are the losers?

It is quite possible that there is indeed no such thing as Europe in the sense of a united integral entity. There are of course *attempts* to create a Europe in a Yuri_uch format — in the cultural dimension in particular. But it is doubtful that such attempts have a realistic chance of success as of today — that is, if the term *success* is applicable here at all in the first place. Provided we reject the global pop trash and some specimens of must-read classics, we are about to find ourselves forced to agree that an average Irishman and an average Albanian reside in entirely different cultural spaces and neither is going to merge those spaces into a single entity. Although let us go beyond this geographically remote pair of nations. A Frenchman and a German are less remote, more active on the outside in terms of culture, and have perceptibly more in common; nevertheless, their cultural spaces tend to diverge more often than converge. Moreover, even inside a common state structure like Switzerland, cultural spaces of the French-speaking West and the German-speaking Centre and East differ quite dramatically.

Immediately a question arises: is this necessarily a bad thing? To which extent does this plurality of cultural spaces and orientations marginalise Europe in its imaginary cultural confrontation with the Rest of the World?

Such a question appears to be rather a philosophical one. Does the complexity and heterogeneity in the cultural dimension indeed lose to unifiedness and simplifiedness? And what does *losing* mean anyway? Is this a matter of who is scoring goals and who is conceding them? On which level do cultural phenomena compete with each other? What does a reflection of such competition look like in culture? Like a victory of mass culture over high culture? But how can there be a victory where there has been no war? That is, the competitors have never even met, since they are competing in entirely different divisions — indeed (if we hold on to our analogy with sports and competitions) maybe even in different kinds of sports.

Since I have not found an answer, here's another question I wish to ask: where does this heterogeneity and cultural fragmentation of Europe come from anyway? And hence arises yet another question: to which extent is it prone to changes and alterations? To which extent can Europe be 'equalised' and homogenised?

Many years ago (twenty one year ago to be exact) I had the first chance in my lifetime to reside in the very heart, so to say, of Old Europe, having thus added Munich, Innsbruck, Venice, Ravenna and Florence to my subsequently compiled List of Intimate Cities. As a consequence of my three-month-long residence amid those landscapes, an idea emerged, eventually encapsulated in one of my later essays entitled *An*

Introduction to Geography: an idea that the European man was created by mountains and woodlands. Apparently, I was thus referring to the limited nature and specific properties of each separate location and to the fact that each of those locations is related to a certain dimensionally larger composition. I suggested that this had a crucial influence upon what the perception of form in its European incarnation would turn out to be.

Does the question of how to 'equalise' Europe therefore become a question of how to flatten its mountains? Or a question of how to thin out its forests? How can the surface of Europe become flat? How can it be ironed smooth and even, and what kind of iron is to be applied to that purpose? The very geography resists this idea — that is, the idea of a 'united' Europe where *united* is understood as *unified and simplified*.

However, apart from geography, we should also consider history, which has processed Europe quite comprehensively. History, not geography divided Europe into at least three major segments: Western, Eastern, and East Central. As far as the situation of the latter is concerned, there are several suggestions, and here is the one I deem to be the most convincing one. Between the East (that is, Russia and the post-Soviet space) and the West (that is, the so-called Old Europe), there lies something which is regarded as the East by the West and as the West by the East. And in this very stripe you will find countries populated by people speaking East Central European languages and writers composing their works in the respective languages of those countries.

So if there really *are* losers and outsiders in the cultural processes, it is first and foremost the representatives of these countries and cultures. If we assume there were indeed any wars in the dimension of culture, then the East Central Europeans were the ones who lost those wars more often than anyone else. If we examine the currents and trends of cultural products in terms of exports and imports, we can state that in East Central Europe the volume of imports is overwhelmingly larger than the volume of exports. So overwhelmingly that it evokes a rescuing suspicion that maybe this position of an outsidership is in fact a position of secret leadership? However, before we examine what this leadership actually consists in, let us ascertain what has been its cause — in other words: why have East Central Europeans turned out to be the cultural losers of the modern world?

Culture — even in its broadest understanding — has always been and continues to be centred on language. Language, language, and once again language invests culture with sense and durability — even if the language becomes poorer as we are watching it; even if it is shrinking; and even if it possesses and operates fewer and fewer words. Nowadays we are witnessing this reduction of language. However, despite the increasingly important presence of the Visual (Pictorial) in cultural messages, the Verbal still retains its substantial load of sense. Even if we press *Like* or *Repost* on our iPhones, we still confirm with it our dependence upon the Verbal. We still wish to *say*, we still wish to *tell*.

As far as literary messages are concerned, those are attracting fewer and fewer people capable of reading and understanding the works of literary fiction — but still these messages retain their long-lasting uniqueness. And it is clear why this is so: because out of all the existing means of expression, those are the closest to thinking and thought.

So I propose to focus on literature (which is both the outsider and the secret leader of the cultural space) as well as on the very special situation in which it finds itself in East Central Europe.

Does a separate East Central European literature exist? If so, where is it? Who is its embodiment in our present 21st century?

Those are the questions I received from Berlin — no much wonder about that, since Berlin preoccupies itself with everything to the east of itself more than any other metropolitan capital of the Occident.

My reply to my Berlin enquirer is a rather simple one.

The 21st Century has so far not delivered any radical change to the global literary stages — since we cannot view the Eastern Enlargement of the European Union as a change in such sense. The EU has enlarged alright; what's done is done. That said, writers of Central and Eastern Europe have not started to write differently as a result of that — in some other languages, for instance.

Therefore, the East Central European Literature is nowadays represented by the same languages it used to be represented in the 19th Century — that is, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Ukrainian, Belarusian, Serbian, Slovenian, Lithuanian, etc. The Croatian language, once regarded as inseparable from the Serbian language, officially joined this company in the 1990s. My Berlin enquirer has listed 17 languages in total stretching from Estonia to Albania across the entire Central-Eastern European territorial stripe. I beg to differ a little bit — I reckon the number is *sixteen* since the Moldovan language is in my understanding not a language proper but merely a somewhat Sovietised variant of Romanian.

However, in the region / stripe just outlined by me one can also find some languages of its minorities: German, Russian, Ruthenian, Romani, remnants of Yiddish, some other quasilanguages, sublanguages, unrecognised children: Kashubian, Old Prussian, Moravian, Sorbian, the language of Karaims and the language of Azovian Greeks (Urums), languages of some other entities — Karl-Markus Gauss, an Austrian writer and researcher of the so-called 'dying or unknown Europeans', could have composed an even longer list.

Incidentally we can mention that at this very moment in any of these languages — be it one of the 16 *principal* ones or one of the *supplementary* ones — a literary masterpiece may well be being written and it is possible that the last line of this

masterpiece will have been completed by the end of our discussion. But who is there to find out about it? James Joyce is a world-famous literary icon primarily owing to his uncommercialness and unreadability. But who would have Joyce become if he had used not English but, let us say, Albanian, as a vehicle for his creative work? How many people globally would be familiar with Joyce's works under such linguistic circumstances? How many people would believe the Albanians in their assertion that *their* Joyce was really a literary genius?

So here it is. It is the authors writing in all of the above-mentioned languages of East Central Europe as well as their works that actually constitute this very East Central European literature. But if so many languages comprise it, and if all these languages are so diverse and different from each other, what does actually *unite* them? What exactly allows us to say that there exists a certain *phenomenon*?

Well, first of all there is common history and common social characteristics and common fates and common experiences: the 20th-century revolutions, the dictatorial regimes, the Nazi occupation, the Communist era with violence and oppression as its components, the feeling of being not an active *subject* but a passive *object* of the historic Great Game of Confrontation between Russia and the West. Suffice it to remind ourselves about one of the simplest definitions of East Central Europe as a territory 'between the Germans and the Russians' — or, quoting an enigmatic Polish geopolitician of the 1930s who was writing under the pseudonym Wiktor Szyrma, as a 'juncture of nations located between the German and the Russian ethnic spaces'. Such a location between two imperialisms did not, of course, give birth to any optimistic prospects. 'The Central European sense of fear is historically vacillating between two sources of anxiety: the Germans are coming or the Russians are coming', as I wrote in one of the essays about the 'strangest part of the world'.

To the abovementioned, let us also add the permanent censorship obstructions and pressure from the forces in power coercing writers into collaboration. This is a very special East Central European feeling of unliberty and suspension.

Apart from the external factors (the occupiers and the aggressors, the 'Russians' and the 'Germans') let us also mention the *internal* factors present in the region: mutual phobias, vendettas, and various limitations of linguistic and cultural nature: Romanian/Hungarian, Polish/Ukrainian, Czech/Hungarian, Serbian/Croatian, Hungarian/Slovak etc. — all being couplings of hatreds, as it were. In our focus there are quite many striking examples of these. Poles barring Ukrainians from access to universities in the interwar period. Ukrainians who retaliated by destroying Polish cultural heritage after World War Two. Romanians blocking cultural self-identification of the Hungarian and the German minorities. Undoubtedly, the Romanians have also suffered from certain abusers at a certain time in history. As far as the Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian context is concerned, I shudder even while keeping silent on that matter. Sometimes it seems to me that East Central Europe is a terrain on which the Ethnic has permanently been dominant over the Ethical. That is, we have a long, long history of mutual cultural destruction. Actually, this is not exactly history — yet. It is still very much the aggregation of the events of the present time, it is Our Nowadays.

To this bouquet (pardon the expression), let us also add the Jewish tragedy. East Central Europe turned out to be the primary arena of the Holocaust. What was the role played in it by representatives of various East Central European nations and ethnic groups? The answer to this question is still an extremely difficult one and has been neglected far too long, but it is upon the answer to this very question that their future fate depends to a certain degree. Ukrainians, for instance, are still unable to put themselves on a track heading towards social healing, and in my opinion this is due to the fact that we have so far failed to work through the topic of our collaboration in both directions — with Hitler as well as with Stalin. This procrastinated task is constantly devouring us, and it will never leave us in peace on its own unless we put our conscious effort into dealing with it.

All of those repressions, all of those taboos, those skeletons in the closets and stories yet untold constitute — amongst other things — also the unique, unheard-of, and so far unspent potential to be channelled into the realm of literature. In their own ‘unsuccessful’ countries, the writers of East Central Europe have to confront and deal with phenomena for encounters with which their more Western colleagues travel to Somalia or Bolivia.

However, the enumerated symptoms of historical and social commonality comprise only one of the preconditions of yet another commonality — the purely aesthetic one. This commonality is of paramount interest to us.

A kindred awareness of language — this is what characterises writers from this ‘strangest part of the world’.

The literatures of East Central Europe are being created in the ‘**lesser languages**’ which — due to their lack of global influence, owing to their marginality and functional unfitness — have been forced to develop inside themselves, to intensify, since it was impossible to extensify. They have thus accumulated their own qualities of melancholy, irony, and refinement — qualities which eluded almost everybody and which were untransmittable in any translation. Each of these languages — and hence also each of the literatures created using those languages — became ‘a thing in itself’.

An East Central European *writer* (and in this part of the world this weighty word is still used much more often than *author*, an alternative term, more neutral and more Western) is actually narrating his or her story not for the sake of narrating a story but for the sake of using a language for which the surrounding world cares so little that it requires recurrent rescue operations, that its viability needs to be reconfirmed over and over again — at least to oneself. Language is no longer merely a material or a means or an instrument. It now becomes — forgive my sudden bombastic tone — the sense of existence, fragile and ever-threatened. The more you use it and the deeper you immerse into it while using it, the more evidence there appears testifying to the fact that it will indeed survive. And if we replace the word *evidence* with the word *illusions*, we shall get even closer to the truth.

East Central European literature is autistic and autarchic in its own way and thereby — in the European dimension, leave alone the global one — it is doomed to be exotic, incomprehensible and hence uncommercial. If *uncommercialness* is regarded as the equivalent of *unsuccessfulness*, then we shall be able to derive an answer to the question of who really loses.

My Spanish publisher lives in Barcelona and his publishing house runs two parallel publishing programmes — in Spanish and in Catalan. They say that the Catalan segment has visibly shrunk in the last several years — apparently due to commercial issues. However, the publisher himself is a Catalan intellectual and at his university he reads his lectures in world literature in Catalan only.

‘Which language are we going to be publishing you in?’ — this was the question he asked me a long time ago, at the very beginning of our co-operation. And I fired out, ‘In Spanish, of course.’ Fortunately, I was reserved enough not to verbalise what I thought right afterwards: ‘Who on earth needs translations in some *Catalan* language? Who needs this *lesser language*?’ Spanish is global — it is the language not only of Spain but also of Mexico, Peru, Argentina, other fabulous lands I had never visited plus a sizable chunk of the United States. The prospect of the big picture utterly took my breath away.

The publisher understood me alright and nodded in agreement — but he seemed very sad about that. So sad that I was suddenly ashamed. I am *still* ashamed for that rapid fit of imperial chauvinism I got into at that moment. I then resolved never to offend any language in the world again.

I described the flashback of this episode in order to accommodate a certain analogy. Writing in one of the languages of the East Central Europe is like writing in Catalan. Or in Irish Gaelic. Or in Welsh. Or even in Rhaeto-Romance, in one of its five dialects. It is like writing in Schwyzerdütsch — Swiss German — in one of its dialects — Bernese German, for instance. There is nothing impossible about it — each of the mentioned languages is used not only to write but to publish hundreds of books. To each of those niches, Europe grants a right to exist. As a matter of fact, not only a right — it also subsidises their functioning. Thank God Europe still has funds to support them. Or even if it doesn’t have those funds, it still pretends it does.

Writing in one of the languages of the Central-Eastern Europe is like living on subsidies. The literature of Central-Eastern Europe (at least in its most distinctive manifestations) is subsidised all the way through. It is like modern opera, new music, or free jazz. ‘What is the difference,’ — Peter Conradin Zumthor, a prominent Swiss drummer asks me, — ‘between a rock music concert and a concert of contemporary avant-garde?’ I shrug my shoulders in ignorance. ‘At a rock concert,’ — Peter says, — ‘the audience knows the name of every performer. At a concert of contemporary avant-

garde, the performers know the name of every person in the audience.’ We laugh, a little too loudly. ‘What is the difference,’ — asks Peter again, — ‘between punk and jazz?’ I shrug my shoulders again in compliance with the unwritten rules of this game we’re in. ‘Punk is when they play three chords for a thousand people,’ — says Peter. — ‘Whilst jazz is when they play a thousand chords for three people.’

The situation is the same with the literature of East Central Europe. Its authors play in their own languages using a thousand chords and know each and every one of their readers — at least their faces, if not the names. It is the literature of low circulation and several encouraging awards, including the Nobel Prize. It is the literature of sinecures and scholarships. All of the above testifies to the fact that this is the ideal literature. It exists for the sake of its language and believes that its language exists for the sake of its literature, the literature utilising it as a vehicle.

And so the two of them stick together — mutually justifying their existence before miscellaneous subsidising institutions the cumulative aggregation of which we can jokingly refer to as, let us say, God.

Now I have to examine the relations of East Central European literary peripheries in connection with their metropolitan centres. How correct would it be to examine those in the context of postcolonialism?

In my opinion, even if it is, we are nonetheless dealing with another variety of postcoloniality.

The ‘classical’ postcolonial literary examples (originating, say, from India, Indochina, Africa, or Latin America) are being created in the **global (larger) languages**. Problems of translation, comprehension, and of readers’ penetration into the text face incomparably fewer problems and have incomparably greater chances to be resolved. In other words, a novel originally written in English or Spanish — regardless of the quality of its text — has considerably higher chances to succeed. The careers of writers under these circumstances usually follow a geographical path of moving from the colonies and settling in their respective linguistically metropolitan countries. And thereafter they keep writing about Bangladesh and Kenya while residing in London; about Algeria or Dakar while living in Paris; about Macondo or Manila while abiding in Madrid; or about Mozambique while dwelling in Lisbon.

And in doing so, in no way do those migrant authors lose their own initial identity. A French-speaking Vietnamese continues being a Vietnamese writer although in the reference materials he is still defined as a ‘French-Vietnamese’. The reason apparently lies in the fact that multicultural openness is a one-way street of sorts. It is characteristic of the representatives of the Western Civilisation only. As for the so-called ‘components of multiculturality’ themselves — or, otherwise, the postcolonial migrants — they do not display a particular openness to things foreign, and — as befits an exotic creature — shut themselves inside their own microcosms. Not to drive the passions too high with

this issue, I shall recourse to what I would refer to as *mild* examples of this divergence. Germans, for example, love Thai restaurants, but it is difficult in turn to imagine a Thai family from Munich happily feasting on sausages and cabbage. Some of us smoke Pakistani hashish, but it is difficult to imagine Pakistani migrants relishing Schnapps and supplementing it with beer.

Multiculturalism therefore turned out to be a value only for the Westerners. Probably because a Westerner is like a sponge, desiring to absorb everything, each experience, each of his or her contacts with the diversity of the world. This multiculturalism is an unconscious attempt to swallow the world, to rebuild the grandeur of the empires at least on the level of one's own Self.

East Central European authors, as a rule, are virtually denied this privilege of retaining their own identity despite a renunciation of their own 'lesser language' — or, if you wish, despite a liberation from it. Language is one of the pillars of this identity of theirs. When you switch from your 'lesser' language to a 'greater' one, you have to be aware of the consequences — that is, that with such a transition you are destroying a very important part of yourself inside yourself. That is, you are not *forbidden* to switch from a 'lesser' language to one of the 'global' ones (as Milan Kundera did, for instance), but you have to be ready to face attacks and boycotts as a result of your defection. Upon escaping from your native language, you will not necessarily remain yourself in the foreign one.

In any case, we can rule out a possibility of a defection of such kind in another geographical direction — to our own postcolonial centre, Moscow. I cannot imagine anyone of us — originating from Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, or Poland — moving to Moscow and then writing in the Russian language while retaining his or her own cultural identity.

Well, if Moscow is a No, maybe Vienna would be a Yes? That great cultural metropolitan capital of the olden days imprinted in our memory with much more pleasant connotations? Can the Vienna of today attract people born in its former colonies?

May this question remain open for the time being. The special place of Austrian literature in the canon of the 20th century is indisputable. As far as the present century is concerned, that may or may not be so. After all, the special 'Austrian format' of the German language allows many East Central Europeans to view Austrian authors as fellow sufferers in terms of language reception. Maybe there is a chance to view the German Austrian language as a certain communicative bridge? That is, as a special transitional language between the 'lesser' and the 'global' ones?

The last question from Berlin is a logical question to conclude with — that is, what are the future prospects? Will East Central European literature still be in existence twenty years from now? There are some grounds for a dramatic finale of that kind, and I myself have been trying to find those grounds every now and then in the past. And I keep asking myself this question even now.

But if we assume in the first place that the disappearance of certain literatures is a realistic scenario, then we have to expand this question: will literature *per se* still remain in existence? Never mind the East Central European mini-size literatures — will Chinese literature still exist? What about the literature of India? Literature in the English language? Or in the Spanish language?

I am convinced that yes, they will. East Central European literature will remain in existence for as long as the languages of East Central Europe remain living languages. It will last a relatively long time even due to the innate human laziness which reveals itself when it comes to learning foreign languages — thereby remaining as unsuccessful, unrequested, untranslatable, incomprehensible and perfect in its closedness as it has always been.

In other words, suffering a defeat is an extremely important mission. With your marginal undisappearability, with your somewhat spasmodic clinging to each of the words of your own language, the only possible 'lesser language', you seem to be giving an example to all of the cultural winners and with that you prove that if even this poor loser refuses to give up, then literature in general will definitely not disappear — whatever anyone says about its inevitable demise.