Fictionalized Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe
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Fictionalized Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe

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Introduction

1. Historical lives, fictional lives, Central European lives.

Perhaps no other proper name in fiction has been given such a broad meaning as Kafka’s initial “K.” According to the Oxford dictionary, the epithet “Kafkaesque” represents “an enigmatic and nightmarish reality where the individual is perceived as lonely, perplexed and threatened”. The initial K. designates thus far more than just the identity of a fictional character. Danilo Kiš saw Kafka’s initial as specific of what he defined as “Central European” writers. Quoting the critic Marthe Robert in an essay entirely devoted to the idea of a Central European culture, he went as far as to say that it is “a sign of eternal ambivalence” that can be applied to “all Central European writers” (114). Kafka’s “K.” returns as subtext, as allusion or as direct intertextual reference in a number of literary texts, which I tentatively call fictionalized autobiography, by writers who consciously situated their life stories in the post-WWII cultural wasteland. They, moreover, all use the proper name to create confusion as to the factual or fictional status of their narratives. Most of them also embraced the epithet “Central European”.

This thesis is both about a literary genre, fictionalized autobiography, and about the way the authors self-consciously presented themselves as “Central Europeans”, phrasing their life stories accordingly as Central European lives. The ground for bringing together these writers and these specific texts from their oeuvres, is for one part intertextual. The various texts refer to each other, quote each other and, especially in the case of Esterházy and Kiš, self-consciously create their own literary memory, their tradition, by quoting, adapting and ironically modifying a number of pre-texts.

What started out as a descriptive endeavour of a literary genre, gradually became a scholarly, critical, and also literary fascination for the various ways in which these fictionalized autobiographies transgress generic boundaries (between autobiography and fiction) but also ideological, cultural and historical boundaries. The thesis puts these hybrid, fictionalized autobiographical texts next to and in dialogue with a corpus of texts, largely by the same authors, that constitutes the discourse on the idea of Central Europe. The aim of the comparison was to show how generic and formal transgression was related to ideologically, culturally and historically specific transgression.

2. Fictionalized autobiography

I have called the genre under scrutiny “fictionalized autobiography” because all texts blur the distinction between factual and fictional autobiography. To put it differently: texts that urge the reader to consider both the possibility of factual and fictional autobiography. The play with proper names is the most conspicuous device to achieve this ambivalence. There is the play with initials: György Konrád, in one of the versions of his A Feast in the Garden (first edition 1986), presents a character “the author, K.” next to an anonymous first-person narrator and a fictional narrator, Kobra, also a writer. Eduard Sam, main character of Danilo Kiš’ family trilogy (Garden, Ashes, Early Sorrows, Hourglass, 1965-72), appears as “E.S.” in the closing part of the trilogy, whereas already in the first part, Garden, Ashes, the reader was given reason to doubt whether this was his actual name; the alternative name can be linked to the historical biography of the author’s real father. Péter Esterházy mocks this practice of creating ambiguity by using initials. Somewhere in his Down the Danube (1991) it says: “I could say, I am Madame Bovary, I could say, calling for attention, P.E. – c’est moi, or I could say, this I is not a fictional character, but the novelist, an erudite, bitter, disappointed man [...]” (138-139). However ironically, he still evokes his own initials. As the text is set in the first person, and the narrator remains anonymous, the ambiguity is there.
Witold Gombrowicz and Bohumil Hrabal also create generic confusion by means of proper names. Gombrowicz’s novel Pornography (1960) presents an “I, Mr. Gombrowicz, a writer” both as its narrator and as its protagonist in a story set in Nazi occupied Poland. There is ample proof, of which readers at the time were aware, that Gombrowicz was not in Poland but in Argentine exile. At the same time, his Diary constantly shifts voices, introducing for instance a voice in the first person plural that comments upon “Gombrowicz” the protagonist. Bohumil Hrabal’s remarkable autobiographical trilogy Weddings at Home, Vita Nuova, Vacant Lots (1986-87), presents a fictional narrator, Pipsi, named after the author’s wife. The author Hrabal occurs as a character in his wife’s account of their life.

Even though all differ in the way they create ambiguity, all these texts are generic hybrids in the sense that their genre, factual autobiography or fictional autobiography, cannot be established beyond doubt.

Proper names are instrumental in what Philippe Lejeune calls the reading pact. On the basis of identical names for author and narrator, reader and writer conclude an autobiographical pact. As from then, it is assumed that all narrated events are factual. The narrator is engaged in autobiographical writing. When author and narrator have different names, reader and writer conclude a fictional pact that renders all narrated events fictional and distinguishes the narrator from the author as entities belonging to different ontological realms. But what if the text offers clues that disturb either the autobiographical or the fictional pact? What, for instance, if the narrator is anonymous? What if he is unreliable, or himself uncertain about his identity? What if he has more than one name, of which one is identical to the author’s? Or what if his name is reduced to the initial? There is, of course, much more to the distinction fictional-factual narration than just the proper name. But the proper name, either present or absent, greatly influences the reader’s decisions about the ontological status of the text. Chapter 2 maps the various ways in which both the autobiographical and the fictional pact are transgressed, resulting in generic contradictoriness. It also proposes a historical line of growing self-consciousness of the genre.

3. The idea of Central Europe

On the basis of Esterházy’s texts from the 1990s one could even speak of a self-parody of the genre of fictionalized autobiography. But is the genre apart from its self-proclaimed unity in any respect unique for Central Europe? Can the intertwining of fact and fiction be found elsewhere? There are examples from other literary cultures, in other languages: think for instance of Philip Roth’s Operation Shylock, and of the various narrative inventions in autobiography in France, for instance in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet, and the recent example of Houellebecq’s first-person narrator “Michel”. And yet the common reference to a shared historical experience of Central Europe suggests a special relation between the authors’ historical experience and the hybrid forms of their autobiographies.

Not accidentally, some of the genre’s practitioners, notably Esterházy, Konrád and Kiš, helped shaping the discussion on the idea of a Central European culture. This discussion, a broad outline of which is given in the first part of chapter one, took place, roughly, in the 1980s and lost its political raison d’être with the end of the political east-west division of Europe in 1989.

A word on the toponymy applied in this thesis. As for “Central Europe”: the authors who are the subject of this thesis by no means monopolized the phrase. There have been illustrious predecessors, and ever since the decline of the discourse, which in the historical narrative I propose occurred in the aftermath of the political changeovers of 1989, others, with different ideas and conceptions, have appropriated the term. It was never the aim of the thesis to advocate one particular mapping against other ones. Every act of mapping, every attempt to draw the boundaries of a literary culture, or a conglomerate of literary cultures, not only
makes visible a whole range of parallel developments and contrasts, but also creates new exclusions. This is especially the case in East-Central Europe, as Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer insist in their theoretical reflections about their “History of the Literary Cultures in East-Central Europe” (3). In this thesis, I use the term “East-Central Europe” as a working hypothesis, a mere tool to designate and delineate a cultural realm that has mapped itself in different ways. “Central Europe” is one of those mappings; others were (and are, the vitality and the ability to regenerate is remarkable) “Eastern-Europe” and “Mitteleuropa”. My analysis of the rise and fall of the Central European discourse in chapter 1 shows that the choice for the term Central Europe, for which Milan Kundera probably deserves the credits, was of course not meaningless (no act of self-designation is without semantic consequences) but neither did its protagonists give it more than average consideration. Both Milosz, Konrád and Kňš seem to have been rather pragmatic in their use of the term.

The discourse behind the phrase Central Europe was a profoundly heterogloss choir of voices, emanating from the vast space in between the German and Russian linguistic realms. Although Milosz confessed that he considered it an utopian project, to the members of the discourse community - most prominently Milosz himself - the notion of a Central European culture was very real. In the eyes of its critics, however, it was fictitious and historically false. This thesis does not take sides; instead it approaches the discourse and its specific mapping of a cultural and historical realm as an imaginative project, and hence considers the discourse community an imagined community. I am referring of course to Benedict Anderson’s celebrated concept. Anderson’s main concern is the nation as a community that is imaginary in the sense that those who consider themselves members of the nation, draw their sense of identity from a shared national language and a common national history, even if these shared realities, allegedly centuries old, prove constructions from not so recent a past - in the case of East-Central Europe mostly the 19th century. The Central European discourse was for one part a response to the historical domination of the national communities in the region. It looked for an alternative culture beyond national conceptions of literature and history. One may approve or disapprove of the project, on political, ideological or aesthetic grounds; one may call it fictitious or downright historically false, but as a community it is no more or less imaginary than the national communities. Anderson’s concept is not so much about the alleged fictitiousness or even falseness of the nation (although it has been very useful as a tool for deconstruction) but about the ways in which past events, realities and presences have been forged into political and historical national narratives that have proven highly attractive to many. The Central European discourse wanted to be a supranational alternative, problematic in many respects, but, in my opinion, also necessary, productive, and, from a pragmatic point of view, a highly useful instrument for emancipating the literary cultures of East-Central Europe in the west.

The idea of a Central European culture basically entailed the belief that the historical experience of the peoples and individuals in between the Germanophone and Russian areas was unique in two respects. First, the double experience of totalitarianism of the Nazi-occupation, and after 1945 the communist regimes. Secondly, strong endemic nationalism that, according, to Czesław Milosz, fed the individual’s sense of historical irony. Together these experiences resulted, still according to Milosz, in a realm of almost absolute alienation. The resulting discourse of Central Europe was a means of political, cultural and literary self-designation. Here are the main differences with other toponyms that may overlap geographically but trigger a wholly different set of connotations. First, Central Europe is not Eastern Europe because it rejected the Cold War division of Europe into an eastern and a western part. Although the term Eastern Europe has a longer history than its cold war use, in the discussion of the 1980s it basically implied Soviet-occupied Europe. Central Europe should also be distinguished from “Mitteleuropa”, which takes the region together from a
The discourse on Central Europe started in exile. Milan Kundera lived in Paris when he launched the debate in 1982. Czesław Miłosz, who had been paving the way for the discourse since the early fifties, lived in France and later in the United States. Danilo Kiš too lived in Paris when he joined the discussion. The discourse then migrated from the exile communities to the region itself, to Konrád’s Budapest for instance, in the course of the 1980s. This was certainly a result of the weakening of the Cold War. But before the discourse arrived in Prague, Budapest and Warsaw, it had been a discourse of the region’s émigrés in the West, who sought to emancipate themselves from the monolithic “Eastern Europe” in the eyes of the West. The discourse rejected the cold war division of Europe and the Soviet occupation. At the same time it wanted to avoid repeating nationalist or chauvinist responses to the Soviet presence. It looked for its alternative beyond national concepts of culture.

In chapter one I introduce the notion of a discourse community. I do so because it was more than a discourse, more than a debate on shared historical, political and cultural concerns. Czesław Miłosz, Danilo Kiš, György Konrád, Péter Esterházy and Claudio Magris represented the community’s backbone. Among the others participants were Josef Škvorecký, Adam Zagajewski, Adam Michnik and Predrag Matvejević. Kundera, who initiated the debate, was later absent from the mainstream. They defined their mutual ties as more than those of fellow participants in a discussion: it was assumed that they shared the same fate and thought of themselves as companions in historical adversity. Soon, they started to consider themselves the members of a community of writers, a family even, with the éminence grise Miłosz as its head. I submit 1989 as the end of the community, when the end of the cold war deprived the discourse of its political raison d’être. The community disintegrated afterwards.

Danilo Kiš’s death in 1989, usually seen as marking the end of Yugoslav supranational culture, also contributed to the disintegration of the discourse community.

Fictionalized autobiography existed next to this discourse community and was in various ways related to it. The second part of chapter one traces how Miłosz and Kiš phrased their life stories as Central European biographies in a number of essays and autobiographical texts. Chapter 2 is devoted to fictionalized autobiography. When in 1989 the Soviet occupation ended, the underlying concerns that had motivated the discourse on Central Europe - the shared historical experience of totalitarianism and the presence of strong endemic nationalism - did not cease to exist: a sense of alienation and of homelessness caused by the destruction of the pre-WWII supranational culture, nationalism and its mechanism of exclusion. Nor has the genre of fictionalized autobiography ceased to exist. The literatures of the former Yugoslavia give several examples of the genre. The best known example is The Question of Bruno (2000) by the Sarajevo born, now anglophone Aleksandar Hemon.

The continuity of the genre might corroborate the belief that the Central European experience of history produces a specific literary imagination. Its symptoms would be play with the author figure that in the end makes it impossible to distinguish between factual and fictional narration; strong awareness of the histories of the literature in one’s own language, and also of the surrounding ones; intertextual reference to one’s predecessors, and at the same time the imperative of formal invention by which one seeks to distinguish oneself from these same predecessors; extremely close interrelatedness of the literary text and the historical
context. In some cases this lead to revisions of the original work that suggest a never-ending text rewritten every time history changes its course. The end of chapter two presents and analyzes such a case, Konrád’s *A Feast in the Garden*, of which at least three versions exist.

Chapter two takes Witold Gombrowicz’s novel *Pornography* as a tentative starting point of the genre. Written in Argentinean exile, it casts an author figure in a fictional story and thus creates utter confusion on the part of the reader. I read it next to and in comparison with the *Diary*, in which Gombrowicz introduces a wide range of fictional narrative means. I then present the fictionalized autobiographies by Hrabal, Kiš, Esterházy and finally Konrád. The conceptual framework is taken from narratology: Dorrit Cohn has emphasized through the years in a number of publications the need to theoretically and narratologically distinguish fictional from factual means of narration and vice versa. Her concepts provide my readings with the tools to analyze how fictionalized autobiography transgresses these generic boundaries; how it creates contradicting reading pacts between author and reader. Narratology is a means in my study, not a purpose *an sich*. I have therefore not taken up Cohn’s challenging claim that a reader cannot read a text in an ambivalent way, that he or she reads either in a fictional or in a factual key. Central European fictionalized autobiography suggests that, first, the distinction between factual and fictional narration is not as clear-cut as Cohn suggest; and secondly, that much of how readers read an ambivalent text depends on readers’ conventions specific of their literary culture. Chapter two also discusses two critical reception cases of fictionalized autobiography: Miłosz’s response to Gombrowicz’s work and the reception of Danilo Kiš’s *A Tomb for Boris Davidovič* (1975) in Belgrade in the 1970s. The latter is of special importance because it presents a case where, as I argue, formal and generic invention were at the heart of a literary scandal that involved the key concerns of the Central European discourse: its rejection of nationalism, and its search for a supranational literary, historical and cultural model.


Fictionalized autobiography is not just a borderline genre in narrative respect. The lives it presents are marginalized by political history. This goes for the exiles Gombrowicz and Kiš, but also for those who did not go into exile. Esterházy’s illustrious family was expropriated by the communist regime and banned to the countryside, Kiš’s and Konrád’s families were destroyed by nationalist motivated forces and by anti-Semitism, Konrád and Hrabal faced severe problems with communist censorship and published some of their works on the margins of literary life, in samizdat.

In their fictionalized autobiographies, characters are part of a space beyond the national realms. Chapter three traces one of these supranational spaces in the course of time. The imaginary-historical space of Pannonia has a history as a pre-national realm, that is, before nineteenth-century nationalist versions of history imposed its one-sided narrative on a culturally extremely diverse reality. In the work of the Croat Miroslav Krleža, Pannonia was revived as a counterspace to the national Croatian and Hungarian realms. Krleža, as I argue, looked for a common culture and history as opposed to national histories that largely excluded the historical experience of the competing nations. His perspective, however, and that of his fictional characters, I argue, is still basically national. Pannonia returns in the fictionalized autobiography of Danilo Kiš. It takes up Krleža’s political status quo and uses its imagery to reconstruct provincial life in the pre-WWII Danubian world. The chapter shows how Kiš went beyond Krleža’s basically national conception of Pannonia; he wrote into it a history of those individuals who belonged to no national community at all. The literary historical perspective on narrative space shows how historical and cultural marginality can be related to the generic ambivalence of fictionalized autobiography.
Chapter three thus shows how the imagination of fictionalized autobiography saves a whole world from oblivion. Chapter four does the contrary: it describes a core problem of the Central European discourse community, the linguistic situation after the disappearance of Central Europe’s lingua franca, German. The chapter first analyzes the difficulty of the Central European discourse community in the 1980s, when it claimed a common language, a shared tone and sensibility but without an actual lingua franca at its disposal. It then continues by analyzing the pre-WWII culture of multilingualism, both from the perspective of the supranational Germanophone culture (Kafka, Horváth) and of a national language (Krleža). The remainder of the chapter is devoted to two different ways of dealing with the destruction of the culture of multilingualism, in the fictionalized autobiographies of Bohumil Hrabal and Esterházy. Hrabal’s fictionalized autobiographies add the trauma of the ethnic Sudete Germans to that of the Czech Jews and their Germanophone culture. Finally, Esterházy’s *The Book of Hrabal* (1990) explores the perils of a transnational dialogue in the absence of a lingua franca. Also, as a self-proclaimed post-scriptum to the genre of fictionalized autobiography, it shall take the discussion back to generic issues.
Chapter 1.

The Central European discourse community.

1. Introduction.

When Danilo Kiš died on 15 October 1989 in his Joycean exile in Paris, necrologies remembered him as a Yugoslav writer. With the disintegration of Yugoslavia as of 1991, Kiš became “the last Yugoslav writer”. Political borders were redrawn and finally deprived this wandering life (migration had been a leitmotiv from his early youth on) of the relatively stable ground it had provided for over forty years. Homelessness was doubled: a life of wandering was caught up in a rapidly changing historical reality and Kiš’s biography was transformed into one of his own imaginary-real stories. It is hard not to compare the figure of Kiš to the imaginary-real characters that inhabit his fiction.

In the 1980s, Kiš, who was born from a Montenegrin mother and Hungarian-Jewish father, returned to the subject matter which had been the central obsession of his family trilogy – his childhood. The result was “Life, Literature” (1987), a text of which only twenty pages were completed. Originally, it was intended as “a genre very close to classical essayist dialogues, with a system of free association and yet clearly defined themes and comments” (239). Kiš’s main concern seems to have been a re-investigation of the status of the images and memories from his childhood and, as Gabi Gleichmann, a Swedish journalist who was Kiš’s partner in dialogue, proposed at the beginning of the dialogue, “to delineate the part played by autobiographical material in your work on the one hand and imagination and illusion on the other” (231). This uncompleted project reveals Kiš’s literary geographical preference at the time: there is a sheet of paper among Kiš’ legacy on which is typed, in English, in the form of a title page: “Danilo Kiš, LIFE, LITERATURE, A Central European Encounter, Confidential Talk with Gabi Gleichmann” (Život, literatura 231).

Yugoslavia, Central Europe – the two have been present in Kiš’ literary career from its very beginning, albeit in various shapes. When Kiš traveled to France for the first time, in 1959, he did so in the footsteps of many South-Slav writers. A.G. Matoš, Miloš Crnjanski, Tin Ujević, Bora Stanković, for all these the trip to Paris had been no less than a pilgrimage to what they considered the literary capital of Europe. The title of Kiš’s travelogue, “Izlet u Pariz” (An Excursion to Paris, 1960) refers to a travelogue by Krleža from 1926 that describes a journey to Russia; and Kiš quotes extensively from Krleža’s short story “Hodorlohamor the Great” (1919), a satire about a young idealist who goes to Paris but who returns deeply disappointed, after having fired his gun, symbolically, at the city of Paris.

But Kiš’s real guide to Paris in 1959 is the Hungarian poet Endre Ady, whom Kiš translated at the time and whose “Letter from Paris”, written in 1904, he presents in full. A reader at home both in the literary traditions of the Hungarian and the Serbo-Croat languages, Kiš realized that the massive trek to Paris had taken place not only from South-Slavia; and he admits that it is because of a poet like Ady that “I have not come to Paris as a stranger but rather like someone on a pilgrimage to the intimate countryside of his own dreams, to some kind of Terra Nostalgiae” (“Izlet u Pariz” 532). Central Europe, in its microcosmos of a shared, a bilateral South-Slav-Hungarian tradition, is already significant here; but it is still Belgrade, in a short but poignant description, that appears as the “mother haven”, from which “it is easy to go on a journey” (534). In the 1980s, the situation was almost the reverse: Belgrade had become for Kiš the čaršija, a philistine environment, the Belgrade writers and critics a nationalist cosa nostra. If he was the “last Yugoslav writer”, then of the multi-ethnic and multilingual Yugoslavia; when that country of the mind disappeared – and for Kiš, I
assume, the decline began when he was attacked by the Belgrade critics after *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* was published in 1975 (see chapter two), he adopted as his home Central Europe, which was in more than one respect – its multilingualism, the dominant presence of several, competing nationalisms, and for those who were intellectually engaged outside the national communities, the sense of belonging to a cultural interstice – a macrocosmos of Kiš’s former home.

His migration more or less coincided with the beginning of the debate on Central Europe. The Czech writer Milan Kundera, an exile since the suppression of the 1968 Prague spring, published his essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe” on 26 April 1984. Thematically, the debate had started in 1983, when Czesław Miłosz, exiled since the early 1950s and Noble laureate in 1980, devoted the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard University to his “corner of Europe”. Both Kundera and Miłosz stood at the basis of what was to become, during the 1980s, a discourse: a group of writers and poets, most of them living in exile, who, debating on the cultural and literary consequences of a common past and shared literary traditions, attempted to distinguish themselves both from the East and the West. Living in Paris, Kiš adopted Central Europe as his community, both imagined and real, or, as he put it himself, “I spiritually moved to Central Europe” (*Gorki Talog Iskustva* 281).

2. The start of the debate

Kundera’s “The Tragedy of Central Europe” in the *New York Review of Books* launched the debate on Central Europe. The essay received much attention and was widely read as a declaration of intent. Although it was not the first time the region was mentioned as a separate cultural and historical entity between the East and the West, Kundera’s essay somehow provided a synthesis of several ideas and sentiments that had appeared or were appearing at that time, both in the countries under Soviet rule and among Western exiles. Kundera himself soon withdrew from the discussions his essay initiated. True, he returned to the matter in his polemic on Dostoevski with Joseph Brodsky, and treated it in passing in his *The Art of the Novel* (original French edition 1986), where he draws the outlines of what he calls a Central European novelistic poetics. But Kundera was absent from the mainstream of the 1980s debate, and he did not participate in the key meetings of the Central European discourse community.

In his absence, the notion of Central Europe, initially a discourse of exile, became increasingly lively and toward the end of the decade succeeded in involving writers from within the region, linking them up to their exiled compatriots. Previously, samizdat had provided a link between the unofficial literary life under communism and the writers in exile; when Central Europe became widely accepted as a common denominator for the region’s cultural specificity, a label emerged that allowed the exiles to distinguish themselves from Russian and Soviet literary culture in the eyes of the West. And when introduced in the unofficial literary cultures of the region itself, it soon evolved into a common language, a discourse conducted at a regional level, often opposing the various nationalisms as much as the legacy of Yalta, the geopolitical division of Europe into the West and the East.

Although most of the discourse’s participants were writers, one can distinguish between more politically and more literary oriented protagonists. The ground for this distinction are their writings. Thus the politically minded protagonists seemed first and foremost preoccupied with the question: what is to be done? – calling for a shared discourse of political dissent and, like Vaclav Havel, drawing the outlines of a theory of civil society. The literary minded sought answers to the question: how to write? As Danilo Kiš put it: “I am
interested in the question how to be a Central European writer” (Budapest Roundtable 27). It seems that for most of the literati, exile motivated their participation in the Central European community. From the early fifties on, when he went into exile, Czesław Miłosz had been occupied with defining the region’s cultural specificity. His participation in Central Europe was the fruit of a long intellectual odyssey, dating back to his first prose writings, which attempted to cut across the image of a politically and culturally monolithic communist Eastern Europe as it appeared in the West. Miłosz’ autobiography, Native Realm (published in 1959, English edition 1968), an explicit “search for self-definition”, attempted to color “the white space east of Germany” (The Witness of Poetry 7), roughly the realm in between the German and Russian linguistic areas, as it was predominantly perceived in the West. Exile exercised a similar effect on Danilo Kiš, who in 1988 motivated his choice for the Central European discourse community on pragmatic grounds:

Our principal aim was to develop a strategy whereby we would be recognized as individuals from the point of view of Europe, in the eyes of other Europeans. We existed here and there before this word “Central Europe” came into vogue; writers like Czesław Miłosz, Joseph Brodsky and Josef Škvorecký established their individual identities and became recognized. They helped give the rest of us an identity, so that we could be seen as individuals in the eyes of Western Europe. What is a writer? He is his name, male or female – maybe even the third sex, if you wish – and his nationality... But even when people knew our name, they didn’t really know where to place us, what country we were from, where we belonged. Now, with this strategy of belonging to Mitteleuropa [sic] – which I subscribe to and I am certain that others from small countries do, as well – we have succeeded in differentiating ourselves. Little by little, our specificity emerges... even though we belong to this family of Central Europe. (The Lisbon conference 89)

What at first sight appears a close community centered around a common cultural denominator, was in fact a highly diverse group. One part lived in exile, the other under communist rule in the region itself. The exiles sought to emerge in the eyes of the West as a species different from their Russian colleagues – thus applying a collective strategy only to aim at recognition as individual writers, whereas communist rule confined their colleagues to their immediate cultural surroundings. Political reality thus proved an obstacle and forced the community for the time to remain virtual, divided by political borders. Hence the absence of a forum, of a central place for discussion. A magazine like the Polish émigré Kultura, published since the nineteen fifties in Paris, had promoted early on already a regional cultural détente, as Konstanty Jelsinski pointed out (Between East and West 18). Moreover, Kultura managed to connect the Polish exile community to the world at home. Yet however regionally oriented, this was still an internal Polish affair. The lack of a lingua franca to the discourse of Central Europe becomes obvious from the way the discourse’s key essays appeared scattered in various languages.

This perhaps explains why an outsider like the English historian Timothy Garton Ash could become the chronicler of the political segment of the community. His stay in Eastern Germany and Poland in the early 1980s had made him perfectly fit for the task. His The Uses of Adversity was published in 1989, but most of its reportages were written already in the mid eighties. Analyzing the writings of Havel, Konrád and Michnik, he detects “common Central European ground” in the notion of “anti-politics” (170); in a shared re-assertion of “the fundamental premises of Judeao-Christian individualism” that opposes communist collectivism; and in a shared program of non-violence. This, Garton Ash concludes, “is where Central Europe confronts Eastern Europe: in the autonomous sphere of culture, in the
kingdom of the spirit" (173). His rhetorical question whether "the existence of an imagined Central Europe is finally dependent on the existence of a real Eastern Europe" (187) seems confirmed by the post-1989 reality and can thus be read as an – unintended – prediction of the community's failure to explore a regional politics after 1989.

The Central European literati in the West, on the other hand, did have a forum. During the eighties, the exiled part of the community had the Anglophone magazine *Cross Currents, Yearbook of Central European culture*. Published by the department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan, its first issue dated from 1981. The advisory board changed, but in 1986 for instance, the main protagonists of the debate on Central Europe are listed: Danilo Kiš, György Konrád (although not an exile), Milan Kundera and Czeslaw Milosz; the name of Josef Škvorecký is frequently mentioned. Lacking a declaration of intent, there seemed to be no clear idea about the borders of the region, or the languages and traditions involved: somewhere between East and West, which meant now including, now excluding the German and Russian linguistic realms. More important, *Cross Currents* managed to publish most of the key texts that were written in the course of the nineteen eighties – including those written under communist censorship. Published in English, without distribution in the region itself, its range was obviously limited.

It was only in 1988 and 1989, when two conferences in Lisbon and Budapest provided the opportunity for special round table discussions on Central European literature, that a considerable number of the prominent Central European voices gathered. Their gathering coincided with the thaw of East-West politics and the Central European annus mirabilis; the community underwent a metamorphosis from a virtual into a real, politically vital group of authors. At that point, the key essays that had opened up the cultural debate were half a decade old: Czeslaw Milosz's *Witness of Poetry*, his Charles Eliot Norton lectures, appeared in 1983, his essay "Central European Attitudes" was published in the April 1986 issue of *Kultura* and reprinted in the 1986 edition of *Cross Currents*, and again reprinted in the *Kultura* anthology of 1990 under the title "About our Europe". György Konrád wrote his *Antipolitics* in 1982; an English translation followed in 1984. Soon after, Konrád denounced his East-Europeannes and adopted a Central European identity. *Antipolitics* deploys almost exclusively the toponym Eastern Europe whereas his essay "Is the Dream of Central Europe still alive?", published in the 1985 issue of *Cross Currents*, prefers Central Europe. Danilo Kiš's "Variations on Central European Themes" was of a more recent date: written in 1986, it was published in 1987 both in *Cross Currents* and in the Belgrade literary review *Gradac*. Kundera, who had opened the debate, did not become part of the community. The three essays all spoke affirmatively of the idea of Central Europe, consistent with Garton Ash's view that whereas Eastern Europe appears either a neutral or a negative notion, Central Europe (or East Central Europe, Ash adds) is "invariably positive, affirmative, or downright sentimental" (165).

3. From an imagined community to a cozy family

The political climate had changed radically during the nineteen eighties. What had been a "dream" for Konrád (113) in 1984, proved in the euphoria of 1989 a possible political horizon of not so distant a future. No longer a dissident discourse, the community befell what Czeslaw Milosz remarks for the twentieth century in general, that ideas and experiences "change according to the point from which we view it" (Witness 3). This meant in concrete that the Central European discourse went through its first profound historical change. This put considerable pressure on the discourse. The year 1989 enabled first and foremost an open political culture and therefore a direct political discourse. Havel became a professional
politician and Michnik editor in chief of a leading Warsaw newspaper. To put it bluntly, the literati were separated from the politicians.

The political changeover, however, did not entirely free literary culture from its political undercurrent. Even among those who seemed mainly interested in “how to be a Central European writer” politics were still crucial to the idea of a cultural Central Europe. Judging exclusively on the basis of Milan Kundera’s 1984 essay and the round table conferences in Lisbon and Budapest, it is hard not to think of the idea of Central Europe as a weapon of differentiation on the battlefield of cultural identities. In 1988, one is still fiercely opposing the Russians and seeking support of the West. This much, at least, appears to be the case in a clash between the Russian Tatyana Tolstaya and the Central Europeans in Lisbon. But not only Russian writers felt offended. The Western border, in Budapest represented by the Austrian writer H.C. Artmann, felt excluded too:

What doesn’t suit me is that term “Central Europe”; I only know Mitteleuropa. This term has been overly stretched on this panel, in fact – as far as the Baltic region. I would count Estonia among the Scandinavian countries. Being Austrian – the only Austrian here – I was not counted as Middle European, because we were lucky enough to regain our independence in 1955. Well, that is all I have to say. (CC Budapest 22)

And a third party who took offence came from the South-East of Europe. In her seminal Imagining the Balkans (1995) Maria Todorova scorns the Central Europeans’ neglect for the literary cultures south-east of the Višegrád triangle (Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary) – that is, those in between the triangle and Russian culture. Indeed, the ballot for the Central European community appeared rather limited and predominantly political. Whereas its members seemingly did not care about precisely defining content or boundaries, it was somehow obvious whether or not one could apply for membership in this supranational community. The effect is that now, more than a decade later, the community’s identity can be reconstructed on the basis of its critics, more than in terms of its self-reflection: its actual borders emerge where opponents take offence because they feel excluded.

The self-evident membership of the community is reflected in a metaphor that was to emerge from the two round table conferences – “The family of Central Europe” as Kiš called it at the conference. Konrád would extend the family-metaphor in his necrology for Kiš, calling the deceased “one of us, a brother” and the same Konrád would refer to Milosz as “the head of the Central European tribe.” Péter Esterházy, who joined the community in the capacity of the prodigal son – its most consequent naysayer who nevertheless returned at large to the Central European family in his fictional writings – was to poke fun at these alleged family ties in his novel Down the Danube (1991), where he ironically embraces Claudio Magris (who attended the Budapest conference in 1989) as the family’s chronicler whose travelogue Danubio provided the community with a pedigree. The more often the community’s protagonists gathered, the more intimate it grew; the tighter its literary network, the more frequent and intense its intellectual exchange. And gradually, its strategy for literary differentiation became a strategy of exclusion.

4. Lessons in a shared history – but whose history?

Thus even the explicitly literary Central European discourse (“how to be a Central-European writer?”) was (partially, at least) politically motivated. This has been so from the outset: Kundera’s 1984 essay is representative in this respect. It treats literature in a strongly reductive way, taking it as the basis of its political argument, instead of using politics in order to create space for literature (which would be a summary of the pragmatic involvement of Kiš
and Milosz). Perhaps Maria Todorova exaggerates in her *Imagining the Balkans* when she states that “now, after ten years, rereading Kundera [...] the essay sounds melodramatic and, at times, outright racist [...] and extremely reductionist” (145). One can easily agree with George Schöpflin, however, that Kundera’s essay brought the cultural differentiation of Central Europe from the “Soviet Russian tradition” to the fore, “together with the political systems imposed on Central Europe in the name of the latter” (19). The problem with taking Kundera as the thematic beginning of the Central European discourse is not whether his emancipatory pathos was politically justified or not. The point seems rather that his use of literature in his rewriting of European cultural history imposed an either/or model: it categorized works of literature – mainly the novel – as being either Central European or not, and since his next move was to equate Central Europe with European civilization as such, taking the renaissance as the key intellectual event, it implicitly excluded from the European realm all literature written east of the Center.

The exclusion became explicit and lead to a polemic with Joseph Brodsky when in January 1985 Kundera in the *New York Times Book Review* published an essay entitled “An introduction to a variation” in which he opposed Diderot and Dostoyevski as quintessentially Western resp. Eastern writers – implicitly taking Central Europe as Western Europe’s eastern bulwark: “What irritated me about Dostoyevski was the climate of his novels: a universe where everything turns into feeling; in other words, where feelings are promoted to the ranks of value and truth” (469). The essay contained some political references to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, but it centered on Kundera’s ideas about the historical evolution of the novel.

Kundera’s view of the novel – in casu Dostoyevski – proved an easy prey for Joseph Brodsky’s sharp pen. Responding in the same *New York Times Book Review*, Brodsky stated that a writer should ground his aesthetic thinking not in matters of history but only in art itself; likewise, literature is ill-served when it is used as argument in an ideological debate, which is what Kundera was conducting, an ideological and not a historical debate on the novel. Kundera’s reading of Dostoyevski, Brodsky further argued, added nothing to the reception of this classic literary oeuvre, nor did his specific geographical-historical concept of culture provide useful new insights: “The sad truth about Mr. Kundera (and many of his East European brethren) is that this extraordinary writer has fallen an unwilling victim to the geopolitical certitude of his fate – the concept of an East-West divide” (481).

What Brodsky then concludes about Kundera and his “brethren” set the tone for much of the debates that were to follow, including the meeting of the Central Europeans with Russian writers in Lisbon in 1988. Brodsky accused the Central Europeans, as victims of the certitude of an East-West division, of a politicized, reductive, dichotomous view of culture:

“[..] tragic as the notion of a world apportioned in this fashion may be, it is not without mental coziness. It offers the handy dichotomies of feeling-reason, Dostoyevski-Diderot, them-us and so forth. It forces the individual to make a choice. The process of making it is invariably dramatic and dangerous; having chosen, one has every reason to regard oneself as a hero. The only catch is that the choice itself is very limited. True to the nature of its place, it is a matter of either/or. (481)

Brodsky’s critique is to a large extent justified. A critique, however, of Brodsky, would be that he too easily equates Kundera’s stance with his “brethrens”. Unlike Kundera, other advocates of the Central European idea, like Kiš and Milosz, came up with a much more refined definition. One of Milosz’s essays on Central Europe directly responds to “my friend Joseph Brodsky” (“About our Europe” 99) but to my knowledge, Brodsky did not reply.
Milosz’ and Kiš’s versions of Central Europe and their historical interest in the implications of the European middle for literature and its genres, shall be the subject of the second part of this chapter. However, I do not want to pass over Kundera’s role in the debate on Central Europe. Although he is perhaps less challenging from an aesthetic and literary point of view, his prestige as a widely acclaimed Central European novelist in the West does account for much of the acclaim the discourse received, as well as for the resentment of Russian writers. I would even argue that Kundera’s biased political view dominated the reception of the discourse and contributed to its failure after 1989, which Maria Todorova convincingly signals, to open up a dialogue with writers from languages which were outside or at the periphery of Central Europe – mostly Russians, but also the literary cultures south-east of the Višehrad-triangle. Incomprehension, it seems, became the rule and led to agitated reductionism on both sides. It is disappointing to see that Milosz’s *Witness of Poetry*, which contains six elaborate lectures on Polish poetry carefully presented in the light of a shared regional Central European history, is often reduced to one single quote: its reference to the line dividing the Roman-catholic and the Byzantine cultural spheres as Central Europe’s historical border with the east.

Likewise, Brodsky’s response to Kundera was wrenched from its context. His polemical designation for Central Europe, “Western Asia”, became to the Central Europeans a bone of contention. They disregarded the fact that he presented this border in quotation marks and that he gave Kundera a lesson in history where the latter had claimed to do the same:

[…] Hence Mr. Kundera’s sense of geography. For where he sees universes of feeling or of reason, his Russian predecessor [i.e Dostoyevski] sees the human propensity of evil. Of all people, the Czechs are best situated to observe this common denominator, for they surely haven’t forgotten by 1968 the event that took place 30 years before, when the invasion came from the West. One wonders how Jacques le Fataliste would have squared with the Czech audience then. (480)

These and similar misapprehensions assumed a life of their own. Thus the celebrated Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal ran into Brodsky in September 1990 on Capri. Both had come there to receive a literary award, Hrabal for prose, Brodsky for poetry. Hrabal described the encounter in one of his *Dubenka* letters, translated in the 1992 issue of *Cross Currents*. His account shows the antagonism that now seemed inevitable each time a Central European would run into a Russian author. Now it was Brodsky who was allegedly maintaining the east-west distinction. Hrabal relates how he spotted Brodsky after he just read the interview the “Nobelpreisträger” gave to the French “L’Espresso” (Hrabal’s intentional mistake), “the one where you say that the ideal border between East and West, between Europe and Asia, runs straight down the Elbe. Good for you, Mr. Brodsky!” (170) Hrabal does not hesitate to give his esteemed Russian colleague a lesson in history:

So, the border between East and West runs straight down the Elbe, does it? Funny, I’ve never thought of it like that. German philosophy belongs east of the Elbe really: Schopenhauer was born in Danzig, Immanuel Kant lived his whole life in East Prussia, in Königsberg; Fichte and Hegel were Berliners, and Berlin’s a stone’s throw from the Elbe; and Nietzsche was proud of having a Pole for a mother. (170)

Although I know of no response by Brodsky, he might have come up with a historical counterexample. For instance: if he would have started from their meeting place, the isle of Capri, he could have pointed out that on this same island where they were having their gentlemen’s disagreement, Gorki spent years at the beginning of the twentieth century, laying
the foundations with Lunacharski and Bogdanov for socialist realism, which was later to become a doctrine that yes, had spoiled the lives of Central European writers, but then, not only of Central Europeans...

In any case, these and similar misapprehensions lay bare a contradiction in the discourse of Central Europe. Czesław Milosz considered as an essential trait of the Central European imagination its "awareness of history": "it seems to underlie the treatment of various subjects [...] a kind of time which is modulated in a different way than is the time of their Western counterparts" ("About our Europe" 100). This is convincing as long as Milosz discusses it on the basis of works of literature from Central Europe itself. But when applied as an argument in the political arena, as an instrument for differentiating the Middle from the East, it loosest its refinement and becomes vulnerable to counter-examples that easily take the edge off the argument. Thus the Russian Eduard Limonov countered what is probably the most frequently cited cause for the Central Europeans' historical awareness, the consequences first, of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and then of Yalta, by giving a provocative and extreme counter-example at the Budapest conference in 1989:

The concept of Central Europe is dishonest, to say the least. In 1935 Poland signed a nonaggression pact with Germany, before the Russian-German pact of 1939, you should know. In 1938 Poland took portions of Czechoslovakia. You don't remember that; you only remember the German-Russian pact of 1939. ("The Budapest Roundtable" 21)

A few years later, tv camera's caught Limonov in the presence of Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadžić, in the "dishonest" act of firing a few shots at besieged Sarajevo. I quote him here for the vulnerability of the Central Europeans' use of history. Especially the way it treats the heritage of nationalism: Limonov reminds the Central Europeans of their long and painful political history where, far from striving for regional federation, the cultures of nationalism confronted each other. Not that the Central Europeans were not aware of these sensitivities of history. On the contrary. Ash sums up: "Havel goes out of his way to underline the lesson of his fellow intellectuals' 'post-war lapse into utopianism', [...] Konrád declares bluntly: ‘After all, we Central Europeans began the first two world wars'. The English chronicler adds a quotation from the Czech writer Jiří Gruša, who at a meeting in Budapest in 1985 reminded that “it was we [the writers] who glorified the modern state” and that “our nationalist odes may be found in all the schoolbooks of Europe” (167). All these examples show that the first obstacle the Central European idea encountered when looking for a common past, was the heritage of nationalism and its spokesmen, writers and intellectuals, that is: their own ancestors in their respective national traditions.

5. A history beyond national culture: a supranational history?

History, their version of history, was perhaps the core of the Central Europeans' discourse formulated during the 1980s. The attempt to replace the monolithic Eastern Europe by the "utopian" Central Europe was considered an act of dissidence, "romantic and subversive" as Konrád said (Dream 109). The discourse not only opposed the geopolitical versions of history that maintained the east-west division, but also the versions of histories promoted by the various nationalisms within the region. Konrád once more: “Suppose we could transcend the national; the next level would be Central European” (112). But their writing of an alternative history was not an academic endeavor. As no historian was part of the discourse community, rewriting consisted of the mere repetition of a limited number of elements that were taken as
the basis for “a common past in spite of the multitude of languages and nationalities” (Milosz, “About our Europe” 99). Thus there is frequent mention of “the baroque architecture of Central European cities, the tradition of its universities, and the work of its poets” (Milosz 99). Central European literature is said to have distinguished itself for its “tone and sensibility” (Milosz 99) and Kiš asked himself “Why it is when I read the works of Andrzej Kuśniewicz, a Pole born in 1904, or Péter Esterházy, a Hungarian born in 1950, I find something in the way they put things that draws them close to me, a Central European poetics if you like?” (“Variations on Central-European Themes” 111).

Why this impressionist rewriting? In this form, it could hardly convince skeptics to add the supranational Central European version of history to their “geopolitical myth of the East-West division” – let alone nationalists to reconsider their paradigm. The main reason seemed to be that Central Europe, as Milosz put it, “was hardly a geographical notion”; instead it was an imaginary realm the borders of which consisted of “the ways of feeling and thinking of its inhabitants […] mental lines which seem to be more durable than the borders of the states” (100). Following this line of thinking, the discourse carefully avoided identification with the Habsburg empire, the last political entity that had contained a considerable number (eleven, Konrád points out) of the Central European nations within its borders. And the last thing the discourse was aiming for, it seems, was to revive the ghost of Mitteleuropa. Not only because this would evoke the past dominance of German and Austrian culture, possibly giving rise to nostalgia that was simply impossible in view of the fundamental discomfort in modernist portrayals of Habsburg culture (Miloš Crnjanski, Jaroslav Hašek, Miroslav Krleža to name a few) – and highly undesirable to writers who intended to attract genuine attention for the differentia specifica of their work.

The disappearance of Germanophone culture as a result of the demise of the Habsburg empire, the destruction of the Jews in World War II and the expulsion of ethnic Germans after 1945, marked the end of a strong and old multilingual culture. The Germanophone ancestor that is most often mentioned, Franz Kafka, is predominantly presented in the light of his bilingualism, but neither Kiš nor Milosz read German, although both grew up in environments that had been multilingual. This double destruction of Germanophone culture in Eastern-Central Europe is a theme in Bohumil Hrabal’s remarkable autobiographical trilogy, about which more in chapters 2 and 4. Yiddish also deserves mention in this respect. Milosz, writing in 1959, recalls how in his native town Vilnius both Polish nationalists and leftist intellectuals of Jewish origin neglected Yiddish - for different reasons of course. Only later, in New York, did he discover through the English language – so doubly removed – its “unique combination of tragedy and humor” (Native Realm 98). The example also shows the effect exile had on the perception of the region: observed from the outside one is more inclined to see the junctures than the faultlines.

The discourse community thus faced not simply the absence of a lingua franca, but a vacuum. It is this absence of a lingua franca, the presence of a void that appears almost as a mute language holding the community together. This might explain why the discourse, searching for a more tangible common language, clung to the metaphoric “ways of expression of its writers and poets” – a rather feeble basis. The historical irony is that after 1945 a new lingua franca was imposed, Russian. But in spite of the manifold and intense literary and intellectual ties with Central Europe, witnessing for instance Milosz’ constant reference to Russian literature and Kiš’s extensive translations of Russian poetry, Russian was unacceptable for political reasons.

Language was not the only facet of history that indicated absence and emptiness. In general, what had once been the supranational glue of the region, now no longer existed: the intensive cultural exchange facilitated by the presence of Jewish and Germanophone culture. So the task the Central European discourse set to itself was: to partially restore, partially
invent, in a historical vacuum (an “imaginary realm” as Miłosz put it), a supranational culture that, while being a firm negation of the dichotomous east-west version of post world war II history, could become a plausible alternative to the narrow minded cultural memory of the national imagination.

What complicates the matter is that the discourse has not lived in a political vacuum after 1989. National culture strongly re-affirmed itself and posed a serious ideological challenge to the regionalist discourse of Central Europe which, according to Kiš, “by ignoring differences and stressing similarities […] gives the mirror image of the nationalists, who ignore the similarities and stress the differences” (“Variations on Central European Themes 97”). National culture not only re-affirmed itself as an imagined community. As the destruction of Yugoslavia demonstrates, the national discourse started from its cultural re-affirmation whence it transformed itself into a zealous political force, imposing its cultural parameters on the political reality of the post-1989 era. Seen in this light, the discourse of Central Europe was in the 1990s once more turned into a discourse of dissent, of what was, at least in the former Yugoslavia, the prevailing political language.

From the geopolitical point of view, the discourse developed in the opposite direction. Western policy makers, both in the field of economics and international affairs, acknowledged the region as a separate political entity by officially abolishing the term “Eastern Europe”. “Central Europe” as a common denominator became the rule. As Richard Holbrooke, United States’ special envoy during the Yugoslav war, wrote in 1998: “We abolished the outdated Office of Eastern European Affairs […] and we also banished the phrase ‘Eastern Europe’ from our official vocabulary, replacing it with the historically and geographically more accurate ‘Central Europe’. Unfortunately, most people, including the media, still use the outmoded phrase” (Holbrooke, To End a War, 8). Although a sign of emancipation, the political recognition of “Central Europe” as opposed to “Eastern Europe” caused considerable strategic difficulties for the new dissidents who emerged from the much more diffuse post-1989 cultural scene. Take for instance the complaint of the Macedonian, “post-Yugoslav”, now Anglocphone playwright Goran Stefanovski. According to him, when presenting himself and his diverse literary culture to the West, the epithet “Eastern European”, associated with the Iron Curtain and dissidence of the classical, say Havel type, proved ineffective after 1989; he not even mentions “Central Europe”. And yet, like Milosz in the early 1950s, and Kiš in the early 1980s, Stefanovski felt the need for a context for his work in the west (“Tales from the wild east” 4). Ignoring Central Europe, he prefers the good old Eastern Europe, taking its connotations for granted. Thus Stefanovski’s concern is to come to terms with the fact that after 1989, in the West, the term “Eastern Europe” has lost its “sex appeal”, which refers to the now lost charm and the political necessity that used to assure Western response.

Thus the toponym Central Europe came into vogue after 1989. There are also other signs of “success”. The pragmatic motivation of the discourse paid off in the 1990s. Kundera, Škvorecký and Miłosz were of course established writers by the time they joined the Central European discourse community. The work of Kiš on the other hand greatly profited and succeeded in attracting the kind of genuine literary attention the author had striven for. J. Coetzee in Giving Offence discusses Kiš’s ideas about self-censorship. Even when Coetzee – or Seamus Heaney discussing the poetry of Miłosz in “The Impact of Translation” – does not explicitly mention Central Europe as a common denominator, the discourse can still be said to have succeeded in drawing attention to the merits and specific parameters of the individual work of some of its writers – on their terms and originating in a context which they had themselves created.

6. Historical irony put to the test
There still remained the ideological challenge of nationalism. Let me recall that according to Milosz, a specific sense of irony distinguished a Central European from a nationalist:

Humiliated national pride usually gives rise to delusions, to self-pity, and to mythologies. Observing that, a Central European writer receives training in irony. The very condition of being a Pole or a Czech or a Hungarian becomes an object of his irony, which colors his approach to life. ("About our Europe" 101)

What differentiates, according to Milosz, the Central European writer from his colleagues who write within the national community, is his ironical response to the pathos of the national imagination. Kiš asserted that the idea of Central Europe was the “mirror image” of the national community. It thus emphasized, according to him, the region’s similarities and not the differences. But is the idea of Central Europe, if it really is only a mirror image, immune to its own historical irony? After all the discourse claimed, at least for one part, the role of victim of history – most easily discernible in Kundera’s definition of Central Europe. So is the Central Europeans’ version of regional history free of the pathos it detects in the culture of nationalism? Milosz’s definition of the Central European’s historical imagination dates from 1985. Now, after almost two decades, the historical irony ascribed to the Central European can be conceived of in two ways.

Following the discourse into the 1990s one is led to Péter Esterházy’s novel *Down the Danube* (1991), in which the Danube basin, synecdoche of Milosz’s “white space in between Germany and Russia”, fails to provide the travelogue with a plausible and closed plot. The novel is an exercise in self-irony, even in self-mockery: it mocks the family-metaphor that framed the discourse community, and seems to mock the very regional, supranational concept of culture that underlies the Central European idea. However, as irony is something entirely different from blunt negation, I take Esterházy’s stance as negatively affirmative: his novel is also a portrait of the Central European discourse community. Self irony does not affect the discourse community’s basic move away from national culture – a move in which the same Esterházy has always shared, in spite of his critique of the Central European idea.

Whereas Esterházy’s irony signals a change in the discourse’s self-attitude, a second reading of Milosz’s historical irony would point at continuity, or even at a tradition. Even if its critique of nationalism presents itself today under different banners, as a contestatory discourse which draws borders of the mind rather than geographical borders, it has indeed produced a way of memorizing that is more durable than the cultural and political issues of the day, a line of thinking that did not weaken but was, on the contrary, affirmed by the changes of 1989: when the national cultures re-affirmed themselves after 1989, the sense for historical irony continued to be fed by the course of events.

This second reading of “historical irony” can serve as the basis for a number of tentative conclusions about the discourse’s merits. Following its “borders of the mind”, the discourse first and foremost laid bare a continuous struggle of individual writers and their literary community with a political culture whose face changes constantly but whose underlying ideology subjects literature to its own programmatic standards. In this light, the similarities between socialism and nationalism, the political cultures of pre- and post-1989, outshine the differences. This depends of course on the vantage point one chooses: the case of, say, Poland or Hungary offers a completely different picture from the aggressive nationalist politics in post-1990 Yugoslavia. Yet the fact that the situation was the reverse before 1989 – the communist Yugoslavia having a much more relaxed cultural climate than the Soviet satellite states – suggests continuity rather than a radical break.

That the Central European discourse was early aware of the threat of nationalism, indeed, that it was a continuous struggle with nationalism, cannot be overestimated. Instances
are Miłosz’s aversion to Polish nationalism which he experienced as a young poet in the 1930s and later on, in exile, as a threat to his more refined stance against communism; Danilo Kiš’s writings about Serb-Croat, Serb-Hungarian and Hungarian-Croat antagonisms from the early 1970s; György Konrád writing under communist censorship devoting in “Is the dream of Central Europe still alive” prime attention to the threat of nationalism. Their efforts did not prove futile after 1989. They recorded resistance to nationalism and invented alternative concepts of culture. Their early analysis of nationalism became more refined over the years and served as a model for the resistance of writers, like the Croatian playwright Slobodan Šnajder or the already mentioned Macedonian Goran Stefanovski, who were faced with nationalist politics after 1989. Perhaps most important is the intellectual self-critique of the Central Europeans: they recognized the crucial role their nineteenth-century literary ancestors had played in the creation of national consciousness.

All this is perhaps too fragile a basis for a cultural tradition: shared resistance against nationalism does not automatically mean a shared supranational culture. Nevertheless, the mental borders are definitely there, even though the discourse community that developed the idea of Central Europe dispersed and even though the connotations of the toponym Central Europe are nowadays different, due to the thoroughly changed European and global discursive landscape. The metaphor most ex-Yugoslav expatriates chose for their exile, “Yugo-Atlantis” and its imagery of loss, absence and destruction, is regarded in many respects a continuation of the imagery of Central Europe. It insists on a feeble though once very real supranational and multicultural Yugoslav identity as a microcosm of Central Europe. Kiš in his “Variations on Central-European Themes” compared Central Europe to the “Dragon of Alca in Book II of Anatole France’s Penguin Island, the beast with which people used to compare the symbolist movement: no one who claimed to have seen it could say what it looked like” (95).

But there is critique too. The Bosnian poet Semezdin Mehmedinović (1960), for instance, rejects Kiš’s notion of the apatrid as a denominator for his absence from his native Bosnia and his American exile: “It is tempting to identify with the man without fatherland, but to do a thing like that one needs more conceit than I dispose of, in order to be able to say – well, I am an apatride” (interview with the author in Dani; my trans.) His stance toward Kiš’s Central-Europeanness seems ambivalent. For instance, he reproaches Kiš’s concept of Central Europe for its complete ignorance of Bosnia’s cultural diversity. But his critique of nationalism shows traces of Kiš’s seminal essays written in the early seventies. Why I bring up the stance of Mehmedinović is because I think his discomfort with the notion of apatride springs not so much from Kiš’s use of it, nor from the tradition it created. Mehmedinovic finds vanity in the notion, which I read here as a token of inauthenticity, as a label serving the outward presentation of the exiled writer rather than being a genuine denominator for an inner sense of displacement. Mehmedinović’s discomfort with the notion stems, I gather, from its uncritical recycling after the demise of Yugoslavia, from the way apatride was massively and often automatically repeated in an exclusively political context. (For instance, Apatridi was a series issued by the Belgrade publishing house B92 identified with oppositional politics under the Milošević regime). When Mehmedinović suggests that the notion of apatride is hackneyed, he is offering more than just an aesthetic critique. He is saying that automatic, unquestioning re-use of a self-definition coined by one’s predecessors (or by one’s earlier self for that matter), is a sign of the writer’s deafness to the memory of the word and its sensitivity to the context in which it is re-introduced. In the case of apatride, which Kiš appropriated and applied to his own individual aesthetics of homelessness, massive recycling has endowed it with a collective instead of an individual identity and therefore with the threat of collective victimization. What Miłosz says about the origin of the nationalist imagination, “humiliated national pride usually gives rise to delusions, to self-pity, and to mythologies” (“About my Europe” 101), also goes for individuals who are first and foremost
excluded from the national community, the *apatrides*, once they define their experience of homelessness collectively rather than individually, producing their myth of the *apatride*, of the victim of nationalism. The writer's discomfort is with community as such, not just the national one. His "literary politics", the need to continually redefine himself in a continually changing reality, to either invent new labels or re-invest old ones with his own intention, are subjected to political, but also to literary rules, to the sensitivities of literary language. Mehmedinović suggests that a writer has to continually redefine his language, re-adjust it to the changing context, otherwise it will coincide with political discourse. The literary word's independence from the political word is hard-won and not a priori given.

This style-based understanding of historical imagination accounts perhaps for Mehmedinović's discomfort with the *apatride*; it can also account for the gradual weakening of the denominator "Central European" after 1989, the most eloquent – and ironical – expression of which one finds in Péter Esterházy's novel *Down the Danube*, where the notion is tested in the changed political, cultural and literary world of post-1989. As a counter example one can take György Konrád's essays written after 1989. Konrád is the only key participant of the Central European discourse community who has consequently applied the toponym Central Europe after the political change-over. His position in internal Hungarian affairs both before and after 1989, his opposition to nationalist politics in the neighboring former Yugoslavia, as well as his opposition to NATO's intervention in Kosovo and Serbia in 1999, all this he phrased in the language of the Central European discourse. His language remained the same, and so has his place of writing. One could go as far as to say that Konrád, although a real globetrotter, has remained immobile ever since the novel *A Feast in the Garden* (first edition 1986), where he chose his Central European Budapest garden as the place of writing. The garden re-occurs in Konrád's critical assessment of the NATO intervention in Kosovo, as does the notion of Central Europe. "Seated in a corner of the garden, protected by the wall", (26) Konrád writes:

There is a kind of Central European solidarity that considers horrors as a whole, without thinking that one horror is good because our allies have committed it, and the other is bad because they, the bad guys, were the ones who have committed it [...] The Central European sees himself rather as a small human being and prefers to survive history than to make it, he prefers watching the victim rather than the mighty and the powerful, and he abhors conceited pomp. (32, my trans.)

In 1986 Garton Ash characterized Konrád's writing as neither one thing nor the other, neither political nor literary, or perhaps both at the same time. In any case, he considered it "Jugendstil: colorful, profuse, expansive, and ornate" (164); on the other hand it, was "contradictory" to such a degree that it "infuriated" the English chronicler – but then, Ash was looking for a political agenda, which requires a set of unambiguous statements. The boundary between political and literary discourse in Konrád's work is problematic, for sure. On the one hand, his continuous self-contradiction could be called literary – an indulgence in the paradox. On the other hand, his 1985 *Cross Currents* essay, for instance, seemed more concerned with political than with literary culture, speaking almost throughout the whole essay in the first person plural, mentioning literature or the novel only in passing. Was this, as supreme irony, another instance of what Garton Ash defined as the "Hungarian Periphrastic": "a language of diabolical circumlocution, of convoluted allegory and serpentine metaphor [where] nothing is said directly"? (133) If this is the case, than one of Konrád's critics, Mehmedinović, either fails to interpret Konrád properly or simply refuses to accept this style of speaking in addressing nationalist politics:
I believe that an intellectual attitude creates its own necessary environment and not vice versa, and that the problem is not the environment but the intellectuals themselves, their stature. For instance, Arthur Koestler found an environment for his intellectual attitude wherever evil was committed, for as an intellectual he felt the need to take a position toward evil… György Konrád, specialist for Eastern European affairs, is not of the same stature as Koestler – he invested his intellectual prime in his involvement with the Balkans in the nineties, his great intellectual prime, on the wrong side. And there were only two sides, and so fifty-fifty chance even for a blind man to chose the right side. What I want to say is: one is not just an intellectual in one’s relation to “the intellectual environment in one’s country” but in one’s relation to the whole planet. (interview in Dani)

Whether Mehmedinović fails to see the nuance in Konrád’s discourse or whether he simply considers Konrád’s style inconsistent with the nationalist reality of the Yugoslav war, fact is that Konrád is consistent in presenting his Central Europe as a utopian project. He did so during the 1980s and continued to do so during the Yugoslav wars. That he fails to catch up with the critique of nationalism of younger literati like Mehmedinović, is perhaps due to the different kinds of exile. Konrád’s exile was spiritual. Bosnian exile, which Mehmedinović endured, was actual. The “country of the mind” is surpassed by actual exile.

Konrád’s garden is a place for both political and literary writing, an imaginary meeting place of the private and the public author. One can only speculate why Konrád stubbornly persists in his use of Central Europe, why his garden is still the same place for him after twenty years. It was in this Central European garden that he asked himself: “What in my subterranean life can be brought to the surface? My biography, I see it groping” (A Feast in the Garden, English edition 4), and it is still the same garden from which, with a disapproving look, he observes NATO airplanes flying to Belgrade in 1999. Thus autobiographical writing and the place of writing seem not to affect each other in Konrád’s universe; the self is as immobile as is its cultural locus, its milieu.

In the remainder of this chapter I wish to examine two other individual instances of the idea of Central Europe which, more than Konrád, proved sensitive to the workings of history. Both Kiš and Miłosz constantly rephrased their individual identity in response to changes of place; unlike Konrád, they both spent a considerable time of their active literary life in actual exile. It is in this dialogue of the self and its surroundings in a changing reality that I shall seek to invert the image of Central Europe as it has been presented up to now: not as a cultural community that generates individual identities, but as a concept space that was one in a range of topoi in a search for an individual literary identity beyond the national, east of the west and west of the east.

7. A distinct voice from the Polish-Lithuanian borderland

The Polish poet and writer Czesław Miłosz was regarded as the “father” of the discourse community. His 1985 essay “About our Europe” already echoed the polemics of the discourse community with its opponents. Joseph Brodsky provocatively called Central Europe “Western Asia”, which prompted Miłosz to open his essay apologetically, stating that “there exists such a thing as Central Europe, even though many people deny its existence, starting with my friend Joseph Brodsky […]” (“About our Europe” 99). In 1983, Miłosz published The Witness of Poetry, his Charles Eliot Norton lectures held at Harvard university in 1981-2. They differ from the 1985 essay in the sense that they do not search explicitly for differences with either the East or the West. Instead, they take Miłosz’s own “Europe” (“Starting from my
Europe” is the title of the opening lecture) as the initial point of a search for a specific historical poetics of Polish poetry. Although they do not deploy the toponym Central Europe, the essays sustained something that is close to Danilo Kiš’s stance at the Budapest conference, namely to create in the minds of the Western audience a historical and literary context for Central European literature.

Miłosz’s motivation is in the first place literary; politics (Yalta again) looms at the background but merely as the *vis maior* that created a blank spot on the literary map of Europe, a “white space to the east of Germany that could easily have born the inscription *Ubi leones* (Where the lions are), and the domain of wild beasts included such cities as Prague (mentioned sometimes because of Kafka), Warsaw, Budapest, and Belgrade” (7). The quotation reveals the geography of Miłosz’ literary excursions, his intention to create a context for Polish poetry leads him to consider a realm that stretches beyond the national community. In this respect his lectures explore a regional poetics that can be seen as an analogue to the regional political détente promoted in Kultura.

Even if the last of the six lectures presents notions that were also to appear in Miłosz’s 1986 essay “About our Europe” (most notably the fusion of the “historical” and the “individual” that Miłosz identified as typical of the Central European identity), the absence of the toponym in the 1983 essays shows that his understanding of literary-historical space is the result of a much longer intellectual and literary project, and not vice versa, where the toponym covers an ad hoc discourse. That Miłosz’ conception is not based on an a priori Central European historical realm is moreover substantiated by the 1986 essay, where the Central European project is explicitly called “an act of faith [...] let us say even a utopia” (107).

When he in one and the same breath adds that while drawing the realm’s mental boundaries “I am also drawing a portrait of myself”, it becomes clear that, perhaps unlike Kundera’s Central Europe, this individual vision hardly tries to revise geopolitical boundaries. Instead, its strives solely to account for the specific traits of its literature. It does challenge the political East-West boundary but only insofar as it interferes with the cultural sphere — in this case the institutionalized East-West boundary, “as numerous Centers for Russian and Eastern European Studies demonstrate” (107). As Maria Todorova rightly objected, Miłosz’ rather rigid boundary with Russian culture seems more politically than culturally motivated. She calls Miłosz’ proclaiming Russian art “sterile and unattractive” preposterous and gives counterexamples (“authors like Iliia Ilf and Evgeni Petrov, Isaac Babel, Mikhail Bulgakov, Andrei Platonov, Veniamin Erofeev and Vladimir Orlov”, only to add that this is Miłosz’s “only breach of bonton” (144). However, more crucial than the East-West boundary seems to me Miłosz’s wish to go beyond the national Polish realm, to situate his poetry and that of his Polish contemporaries in a cultural model that surpasses the national community.

Miłosz’s search for a context starts with what he considers the specific features of his poetry, followed by his biography. In a passage which enlightens the title of his lectures, he further defines the relation between the poet, his poetry and the cultural surroundings:

My corner of Europe, owing to the extraordinary and lethal events that have been occurring there, comparable only to violent earthquakes, affords a peculiar perspective. As a result, all of us who come from those parts appraise poetry slightly different from the majority of my audience, for we tend to view it as a witness and participant in one of mankind’s major transformations. I have titled this book *The Witness of Poetry* not because we witness it, but because it witnesses us. (4)

To Miłosz, poetry is an active participant in the poet’s search for “self-definition” (the phrase stems from the subtitle of *Native Realm’s* English translation). The poet’s earlier self, the I he once was, emerges from the poetry he once wrote. What complicates the poem’s meaning as a
witness of the self is place. The discrepancies between the poem’s place of writing and present reading are so extreme that the poem, about to become incomprehensible, unrecognizable, is in need of a historical map. The poet, apart from being the author of the poem, whose former self is “reflected” in it, becomes, in a manner of speaking, a guide to the reader leading him to the time and place of writing. Without this guidance, the poem shall remain mute. Miłosz’s prose, notably his autobiographical Native Realm (1959), his essays in the Witness of Poetry, up to and including the annotations to the English translation of the long poem Treatise on Poetry (1956, English edition 2001), which are as voluminous as the poem itself, show that part of this need stems from the experience of exile. However, since these same annotations, somewhat altered, were also part of the Polish edition, it appears that the same phenomenon occurs when the place of writing and of reading coincide. The course of time alters the appearance of a particular historical place to such a degree that it now seems located in a totally altered space. Exile, on the other hand, enables the reverse experience: the lost past of one place can emerge at a different spot, even if it was never part of the self’s cultural community. As when Miłosz discovered the Yiddish culture of Vilnius, the city of his youth, in New York. All this seems the effect of the “earthquakes” Miłosz speaks of. Hence his choice for ruins as a central image for the reality of his “corner of Europe”:

The poetic act changes with the amount of background reality embraced by the poet’s consciousness. In our century that background is, in my opinion, related to the fragility of those things we call civilization or culture. What surrounds us, here and now, is not guaranteed. It could just as well not exist – and so man constructs poetry out of the remnants found in ruins. (The Witness of Poetry 97)

Thus when Miłosz is “explaining” his poetry, his writing evolves around three questions, three blank spots that need to be filled in. First, the historical nature of the place of writing, the locus where the poem originated; secondly, his perception at the time of the particular event; third, the way the poem puts in words – textualizes – place, event and perception. Accents shift depending on the questions asked, but at least one unknown always remains, a blank spot that prevents Miłosz’s thinking about the triangle literary form-individual perception-historical context from becoming a closed system with fixed terms.

The Central European discourse is absent from Miłosz’s recent writings. In retrospect therefore, his Central Europe seems a mere phase, a provisional map in a long process, in which the poet defined and redefined the parameters of his poetry. This process began, roughly speaking, in the early fifties, initiated by exile that deprived his poetry of its context. It made the distinction between the place of writing and of (re)reading immediate and often traumatic. But even when the places of speaking and those spoken about are the same, there is temporal displacement as a result of historical events that, “like earthquakes” hid the past almost completely from the view of the present. In any case, both temporal and spatial displacement trigger the need for a context and therefore stimulate autobiographical writing that provides this “background reality”. This background reality, once added to the poem, guides the reader. Historical reality thus becomes a synthesis of the explanatory discourse by the present self and of the former self’s perception of history expressed in the poem.

During the eighties, Miłosz rewrote this background reality and labeled it “Central Europe”. In turn, “Central Europe” partially rewrote Miłosz’ earlier poetry, endowing it with some of the political connotations of its discourse. But the reverse current is more important: Miłosz’s earlier search gave the Central European discourse a history, a constant factor. Exemplary was his quest for a tradition beyond the national Polish community whose geography he considered too narrow to encompass the scope of his personal history and his literary tastes. This was not just a quantitative matter: national culture is qualitative qua
incompatible with this personal history because the setting of the latter is essentially a borderland, not in the strict sense of an area near a border – although that too is often the case – but an interstice in between various, often competing national communities. Hence Miłosz’s continuous re-mapping of geography. In this rewriting, prose and poetry are rivals for authenticity – for him authentic is that textualization of experience in which there is no discrepancy between the historical self and the textual self; that text which can truly be a witness of the self. In Miłosz’s corner of Europe, where historical change seems more radical than elsewhere, literature thus faces an extremely difficult, if not impossible task.

8. The Place of Biography in Miłosz’s Native Realm

Long before he assigned poetry the task of “witnessing” the self through the course of time, Miłosz had already contrasted poetry and prose in the way their styles and genres had responded to “our regret” (1), as the preface to Miłosz’s long poem A Treatise on Poetry (1956) states. He seems to mean here the sense of loss and of absence that dominates his experience of the Central European past. A Treatise on Poetry, a peculiar fusion of didactic, lyrical and philosophical discourse, takes Polish poetry as its protagonist. The first person plural in “our regret” refers to its authors, the poets, whose works Miłosz’s poem critically assesses. It articulates a clear preference for poetry over prose: “But serious combat, where life is at stake, / Is fought in prose. It was not always so. […] Novels and essays serve but will not last. One clear stanza can take more weight / Than a whole wagon of elaborate prose” (1).

The poem is set in a style that Miłosz in Native Realm referred to as “a fusion of the individual and the historical”. Miłosz was to present the same phrase later on, in the 1980s, as quintessential of what he then considered the Central European “historical imagination”.

Miłosz’s later prose works weaken the hierarchy of genres suggested in the Treatise. Poetry, in particular the Treatise as the aesthetic fulfillment of its own poetic task, continues to serve as a point of reference for the “historical imagination”, the “specific tone and sensibility” that Miłosz shall take as the distinguishing features of Central European literature. But his later prose works, the autobiographical Native Realm (1959) in particular, significantly comment on the Treatise. They thus deny that the poem solved Miłosz’s quest for an authentic literature that bridges the gap between textual and historical self. Native Realm, written three years after the poem, presents the Treatise as the outcome of a search for new poetic form, the result of a highly individual development. At the same time, much of the “background reality” that is articulated in the Treatise – the biographies of older poets, differences between the old and the new world, the differing cultural realms of Europe and the United States – is also treated in the prose discourse of Native Realm. Although this autobiography seems intended as a more easily translatable introduction to the English speaking audience than the poetic discourse of the Treatise (whose full English translation is of 2001, while that of Native Realm is of 1968), Native Realm constitutes such an elaborate and ambitious autobiographical endeavor that it demands a place next to and equal with the Treatise. It asks for a reading that contests the hierarchy proposed in the Treatise and that presents the poem as another textualization of the author’s life against its “background reality”.

Native Realm is in the first place an autobiography, following Philippe Lejeune’s definition of the genre: author, first person speaker and main protagonist are all identified as one and the same person, Czesław Miłosz, and thus provide the basis for an autobiographical pact. The author himself acknowledges the need to distinguish not only prose from poetry, and fiction from autobiography. The choice for the genre of autobiography to narrate his own
life was not self-evident. Setting out to “show what a man who comes from the East of Europe is like”, there was the option of fiction, of the novel, but this he rejected:

[...] Involuntarily I would choose details that suit a preconception: that is, I would reject what seems to me atypical. Without the controls of reality to inhibit me, I would be without a ballast, like a balloon. And, in spite of everything, a ballast is useful. So it is better for me to stick to what is mine and to work only with the material I have experienced first hand. (5)

Miłosz rejected the novel for this genre selects events and experiences from “background reality”. An autobiographical narrative, he believes, does not select events beforehand, does not transform experience whereas fiction does carry out such an abstraction of reality. For Miłosz, the novel, by detaching the narrator from the author, changes the ontological status of narrated events, which can then no longer be considered the author’s experience. What is more, fiction leaves out the “atypical”, whereas autobiography highlights the uniqueness of his experience. Fiction, by preferring the typical, presents an image of historical reality that highlights only that which is already known. The typical, for Miłosz, refers to a reality that we are already familiar with, the atypical disturbs our image of that reality. Miłosz’s choice for autobiography actually continues the central endeavor of The Captive Mind which wanted to redefine the image of the East in the eyes of the West, to distinguish between an east and a middle where there was only one monolith East. Now, in Native Realm, his focus has shifted to his own life story.

But he still needs to decide how to balance the public and the private spheres, the history of his cultural community and his personal history. This never posed a problem in The Captive Mind, in which Miłosz presented short biographies of four fellow writers and poets (of whom Tadeusz Borowski is best known) under altered names as illustrative of the effects of totalitarian politics on the individual. In contrast, Native Realm prompts him to directly define the relation between the public and the private spheres. The solution he proposes is that of “looking upon oneself as a sociological phenomenon” (5): “Instead of thrusting the individual into the foreground one can focus attention on the background [...] Inner experience, as it is preserved in the memory, will then be evaluated in the perspective of the changes one’s milieu has undergone” (5). To be sure, this choice is polemically motivated, again with the aim of distinguishing the middle, this time, from the west. In the middle, Miłosz says, public sphere, society and the nation are not stable enough to provide a reality where “a three-year-old’s love for his aunt or jealousy toward his father [can] take up so much room in autobiographical writings” (5) – implying that “western” autobiography does have this stable basis.

How does Miłosz achieve his intended effect in Native Realm? How does he, within the autobiographical pact, balance self and society, his own biography and that of others? There is here consistent attention for the background of his intellectual and artistic milieu. If the former self from the time of writing seems limited or biased, Miłosz does not hesitate to add later memories that objectify his images. This sometimes leads to radical ruptures between current and former perceptions, as in the description of the linguistic situation in Wilno/Vilnius: when living there, he had no attention for Yiddish culture; the description in Native Realm draws largely on the Vilnius Yiddish culture he rediscovered in New York.

Miłosz’s main technique, however, is to present what are in fact parallel biographies, which he compares to his own. Much of this reminds again of The Captive Mind, but the relation between public and private sphere differs. These biographies now serve to illustrate how individuals under the same difficult circumstances were forced to choose different paths in life than the protagonist Miłosz. He does not want to prove his alleged strength of character
but shows how easily his life could have been different. To be sure, these are not trivial issues. At stake are dilemmas like how to behave towards nationalist politics and culture in the 1930s, how, opposing the extreme nationalist right, one could avoid identifying automatically with the Communist party during the subsequent Nazi occupation of Poland; all this in the context of a possible alliance and, after the war, of cooperation with the new communist regime. By means of a contrasting portrait of a person nicknamed "Tiger", Miłosz tells the story of his final resignation from the diplomatic service of the People’s Republic of Poland; he settled in the West, first in France and as of the sixties in Berkeley, where he became professor of Slavic literatures. Coming from the same intellectual background, "Tiger" remained in the service of the People’s Republic; his biography presents the alternative way—how Miłosz’s life could have looked like had he stayed in Poland.

"Tiger" is an alias. This evasion of real persons’ proper names reminds one of similar tactics in *The Captive Mind*. It deserves more attention, for proper names take part in deciding what is typical and what atypical—to use Miłosz’s words. They indicate the author’s view of the relation between the public and the private sphere, between collective and personal history. The first explanation of these “aliases” is protection of privacy, a maintaining of bon ton. The paradox of it is that on publication of *The Captive Mind*, it was actually common knowledge who were the persons behind names like “Alpha”, “Beta”, “Gamma” and “Delta”. They were in the first place intended as generalizations and indicated the author’s belief that the lives behind these abstractions had a significance beyond their individuality. The figure of “Tiger” in *Native Realm* has another significance: the author has told it for the sake of clarifying his own choices. The biographies in *The Captive Mind* served a more general historical point: the presence of “History”, great, superhuman political changes in the individual’s life. But the biography of Tiger mirrors the personal dilemma’s of the I. His is a double portrait, an autobiography by means of another biography. Through his biography, Miłosz analyzes the effects of societal ruptures and sudden changes on his own life. The proper name “Tiger” is an abstraction from individual experience that, unlike the fictional novel, draws on the atypical, on the unique dilemmas and choices of an individual’s life in history.

Thus, when describing how Tiger renounced him in the official Polish press, Miłosz can write that “other, younger Tigers lunged out from behind the lianas of censorship” (296). Is Miłosz suggesting that he, in Tiger’s stead, could have done the same? Impossible to say. Yet the form of this autobiography urges us to objectify personal experience so that we pose questions that consider an alternative course of a life. In telling his personal history, Miłosz narrates from a point of view that in its approach to the self is sometimes at least as distant as his perspective on other people’s lives. Moreover, the distance between his present and his former self but also between himself and other people, is never fixed. From this continuous shifting between present and past, between an autobiographical and a biographical perspective, both the larger social and historical sphere and the autobiographical self are reconstructed.

Thus Miłosz self-consciously sets off the form of *Native Realm* against other forms of autobiography, and of fiction. *Native Realm* also relates the author’s coming of age as a poet. This particular perspective—in prose about poetry—gives rise to more reflections about genre. The theme receives a similar dispassionate treatment as the maturation of the author’s political, social and historical awareness; in fact, all these narratives are intimately connected. The story line culminates in the accomplishment of the *Treatise* which is said to have finally resolved the poet’s struggle with politics and history, with a historical poetry that did not simply mirror external reality but “by fusing individual and historical elements [made] an alloy that one seldom encounters in the West” (248).
I shall leave aside the way in which the story of the writing of the *Treatise* is interwoven with the double portrait of the I and Tiger. Instead, I shall concentrate on the mutual boundaries of the prose and poetry genres. *Native Realm* extensively comments upon, even absorbs, the poetry Milosz wrote before the *Treatise* and before his aesthetic and intellectual onslaught that occurred sometime in the early fifties. Milosz can do so because he sees his early poetry as “false”: he perceives a distinction between the self in the poem and the historical self in his memory. He wrote poems on social themes but “was bothered by their artificiality”; he attempted pure poetry and was “no less irritated” (247). The breakthrough came “greatly aided by my meditations on English poetry” (238). Yet he did not imitate English poetry: reading T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* during the uprising in the Warsaw ghetto (Milosz translated the poem into Polish; an intertextual polemic with *The Waste Land* runs through the *Treatise*) was “weird”, “as the glow from the burning ghetto illuminated the city skyline” (238). My point is that as soon as Milosz no longer sees his poetry as false, his prose can no longer describe a poem’s content. Before the onslaught, poetry served as material, next to memories, from which the autobiographer reconstructs his former self; after the onslaught, the expressive powers of poetry encompass prose. Proclaimed in poetry and supported by prose, the generic hierarchy is now a fact: poetry has become the supreme witness of the self in the sense of Milosz’s 1983 Harvard lectures.

The use of proper names, the shifts from autobiography to biography and vice versa, the boundary between prose and poetry, all show how carefully Milosz situates his *Native Realm* in every respect. What remains opaque, however, is the geographical location of his life story. Written in exile, specifically intended to create in the West a context for an oeuvre where none existed, the text is circumspect in its use of toponyms. The original title *Rodzinna Europa* adds “Europe” to the “realm of birth” in the English translation. However, the boundaries of Milosz’s Europe cannot so easily be discerned. The introduction contrasts Western and Eastern Europe and adds “My roots are in the East, that is certain” (2), “So I decided to write a book about an Eastern European […] about a man who cannot be fitted into stereotypes like the German *Ordnung* or the Russian *âme slave*” (3). The second quote introduces the idea of a world in between, not yet separate from the East but (at least) seen distinguished from a dominant Russian gaze. To this, Milosz adds in a third passage the notion of a lack of form, or rather, a type of cultural form different from that in the West:

In a certain sense I can consider myself a typical Eastern European. It seems true that his *differentia specifica* can be boiled down to a lack of form – both inner and outer. […] Form is achieved in stable societies. […] Doubtless, in order to construct a form, one needs a certain number of widely accepted certainties, some kind of background conformity to rebel against, which nonetheless generates a framework that is stronger than consciousness. Where I grew up, there was no uniform gesture, no social code, no clear rules for behavior at table. Practically every person I met was different, not because of his own special self, but as a representative of some group, class, or nation. One lived in the twentieth century, another in the nineteenth, a third in the fourteenth. (67-68)

In spite of the “lack of form” that seems augmented by a lack of a coherent, collective experience of time, of modernity, Milosz can speak of one of his protagonists as a “stereotype”, someone who “had all the earmarks of Middle Eastern Europeans of his type: money, a knowledge of foreign languages, a large collection of books, and homosexuality” (199). Though the “Middle” seems a slip of the tongue here and does not decisively alter Milosz’s use of toponymia, his notion of a space-in-between, an interstice, seems confirmed by the very claim of formlessness. At stake is not just formlessness but a different
understanding and experiencing of cultural form, related to the different experience of time that Milosz describes. For Milosz, there is Western Europe, which I take as a realm where modernity dominates the experience of time; there is Russia, which, at least in the Polish national consciousness, designates “jailings, deportations, Siberia” (139). And there is the interstice. Milosz’s experience of this interstice while he is in Europe is a negative one: it is neither western nor eastern (Russian). Outside Europe, however, his specific experience of time becomes sharply articulated.

While in the United States, Milosz’s “experience of time” became the basis of his sense of difference. First, there is the revelation of uniformity, that while “None of us, Easterners, regardless of how long he may have lived in France or England, would ever be a Frenchman or an Englishman […]” The popular legend about America, cut off by an ocean as if by the waters of Lethe, was justified” (261). Then, however, his “sickness, which as far as I know does not figure in any psychiatric handbook”, returns: “It consists of a disturbance in one’s perception of time. The sick man constantly sees time as an hourglass through which states, systems, and civilizations trickle like sand” (261). America, or rather, non-Europe, although it suffered from “the opposite disablement: a loss of the sense of history” (263), enabled Milosz to make a diagnosis of his specificity that in the final run transcended the purely individual, as did the significance of Tiger’s biography. It allows him to change his own perspective on his private sphere and to generalize from his personal experience.

Thus, in Native Realm, he phrases his final description of “my Europe, the Eastern part” in a first person plural which includes himself and Tiger, but which now reaches beyond their shared experience. His set of conclusions still presents differences, with the Russians “because there was no blessed patriotic cloud to obscure our consciousness”, with the Polish communists, with Polish nationalists (“neither he [Tiger] nor I were deceived into thinking that the smallness of our country could be obviated” 298) and with the “Western leftists”. He has stripped his sense of difference with both the West and the East from national pathos; he has resisted the temptation of the alleged internationalism of communism which, coming from Russia, held a sense of menace to his local identity, his sense of a Polish past.

Like Tiger’s biography, his own is now connected to the public sphere, to the life of society in a way that draws on his atypical individual experience. At the same time, there is a significance beyond the personal sphere. In Native Realm, the realm beyond is, here still, only reluctantly defined as a borderland, a cultural interstice. The closest Milosz comes to an affirmative definition is when he speaks of “my native province” (13), a linguistically heterogeneous area of many languages existing next to another, both in between and overlapping with various national communities: the Polish, of course, but also the Byelorussian, Ukrainian, Lithuanian and Yiddish communities.

9. Kiš: from a historical to a possible biography

Kiš’s newly found home after he “spiritually moved to Central Europe” only nominally resembled Kundera’s cultural edifice. His own Central Europe, outlined in his 1986 essay “Variations on Central European themes”, was highly tentative. Circumspect in its treatment of Central Europe as a coherent culture, both in the political and historical sense, his essay goes as far as to speak of Central Europe as a “risky business”: “With no clear boundaries, and no center or several” (95), politically non-existent after Yalta, his Central Europe consists of a number of boundaries that are negative rather than affirmative. The form of the essay reflects its careful argument: it consists of 38 short fragments that avoid the historical master narrative Kundera and Konrád presented in their essays on Central Europe. Only in the end do the fragments mount to some sort of synthesis.
The difference with Kundera lies in the essay's rhetoric. It not only carefully avoids nostalgia for Mitteleuropa, it is preoccupied with the present state of affairs within Central Europe. Kundera was more concerned with the region's differences with Western Europe and most prominently with the East, that is, Russian culture and history. Kiš's specific spatio-temporal focus leads him to consider first and foremost the meaning of national culture in the region. It is this pre-occupation which connects his Central Europe to Miłosz's, as both look beyond the national community. Although Kiš considers "the differences in national cultures greater than the similarities, the antagonisms more alive than the agreements", he does speak of "a legitimate desire to see a common heritage in spite of, or rather, because of differences. Indeed, the differences are what make it unique and give it an identity of its own within the European whole" (104). The essay thus draws more on the region's internal characteristics than on its alleged differences with bordering regions, but finds no unproblematic coherent historical or cultural heritage in it. It does lay bare some essential features but these are "negative", that is, they represent negations of an overarching present and past regional culture, for various aesthetic, cultural and political reasons.

The first of these negations comes from the national cultures and their denial of Central Europe. This comes as no surprise. Their denial emphasizes the mutual differences. Central Europe, which according to Kiš emphasizes the similarities between national cultures, appears thus as no more than the "mirror image" of the nation. A second denial comes from poets and writers (Kiš mainly refers to his own Hungarian and South-Slav backyard) who looked for literary models outside the national community, rejected the Viennese model as a backwater and turned instead to Paris. Third, there is the "literature of the left" (Kiš's main example seems Miroslav Krleža) which rejected Central Europe for its provinciality. Indeed, Krleža considered, according to Kiš, "Freud, Kafka and Rilke as provincial, hardly worth mentioning, only fit for ridicule" (104). The only historical affirmative ground for a common regional culture, then, seems the once present Jewish culture, which Kiš calls a "driving force, nationalistic organizations and the democratic internationalist reflexes to them took shape in connection with or reaction to the region's Jewish population" (103). But even the Jewish or Judaic identity is problematic to Kiš, another instance of a negative rather than an affirmative identity. It is negative in two respects. First, because historically, Jews attempted to assimilate in the existing national cultures or in the wide variety of internationalist, often Germanophone variants; and secondly, because Jewish identity as an etiquette was given by the "others". Kiš quotes Sartre's definition of Jewishness: "a Jew, Sartre says, is someone others take as a Jew. His life is one long flight from others and himself" (110). Consisting of mere denials in the past, then, the idea of Central Europe is to Kiš at present first and foremost a concern of the West, which "waking from a long ideological hibernation, discovered that part of its own cultural heritage was missing" (103).

Within the region, the idea of Central Europe only appeals to those in the margins of the dominant (national) cultures. Contemporary writers "whom others call Central European or who define themselves as such generally live in exile or are marginalized and appear in samizdat or are in prison" (111) – the reference is to the main protagonists of the Central European discourse community. Kiš's careful phrasing "whom others call Central European" differs from Konrád's essay "Is the dream of Central Europe still alive", (entirely written in the first person plural) and echoes Sartre's definition of Jewishness as an identity forced upon the individual by the gaze of the other. Kiš's comparison is made explicit toward the end, when he states that the current Central Europeans "like Jews eager to prove how integral a part of society they are, come to realize that their nonconformity stems from a certain reserve and an almost unconscious yearning for broader, more democratic, European horizons" (111-112). Konrád makes a similar comparison when he writes that "the irony of Auschwitz is that
without Jews, Central Europeans have either gone stale or else have themselves become judaized. They understand that communication is the challenge facing humanity” (Dream 10).

In any case, for Kiš one may speak of Central Europe in the absence of this supranational culture, in spite of the discrepancy between the place of the phenomenon and the place of writing, which is, as inner or outer exile, on the margins. As such, his idea of Central Europe as expressed here in the essay seems to reflect his position articulated at the Budapest conference – Central Europe as a strategy for distinguishing its literary cultures from a monolithic Eastern European culture in the eyes of the West.

But the essay goes much further than distinguishing between a political reality that is exclusively national and a supranational region that is merely imaginary. The first part in fact repeats the same traditions Kiš considered during his early trip to Paris in the late 1950s, which he presented as a continuation of Ady’s and Krleža’s travels to the then literary capital of Europe. The second part of his essay reveals how different his position is from his predecessors. For them too, their discontent with national culture urged them to look for alternative literary models, which they then either embraced or rejected. Krleža, according to Kiš, is an example of a writer rejecting both the national (Croatian) as well as the Parisian model, looking instead for alternatives in pre-national folkloric culture. The same Krleža, Kiš continues, claimed of Ady that he “though by his own account a poet of the École de Paris, maintained closer links with Hungarian sixteenth-century poetry and Hungarian popular verse” (99). They thus oppose the idea of a national culture as well as that of a supranational alternative. The latter is to them a provincial phenomenon, to which they prefer a position within their own allegedly more authentic aesthetics. For Kiš however, their position only confirms how any aesthetic commitment in Central Europe is inevitably inauthentic.

Kiš’s Central Europe is therefore based on a paradox: he sees an authentic tradition in a continuous struggle with inauthenticity – alienation is the phrase Kiš uses in the essay, which he later personified in the figure of the apatride – which I take to signify a figure wavering between various national cultures. Kiš’s reluctance to embrace this Central Europe as his home probably stems from this paradox of a common culture in which the various traditions deny each other’s authenticity. In any case, the paradox accounts for the difference between his position and that of, for instance, Krleža. What to the latter were provincial phenomena, Kafka, Rilke, are to Kiš instances of this search for authenticity. Their importance has only increased in the course of the twentieth century. After their traditions were almost completely destroyed, their voices have become essential for the survival of a supranational culture.

As in Milosz’s case, personal exile gave immediacy to and dramatized Kiš’s thinking on alternatives to national culture. In his essay he explicitly distinguishes the fate of the exiled Central European writer from that of other exiles. The Central European is exiled from “the home of his language” (112) because unlike his Russian colleagues, he finds in the West that “his family libraries are suddenly worthless; his appeal to his literary ancestors falls on deaf ears” (113). Hence the importance of tradition – of any tradition that can provide the Central European writer with the forms, styles and values of the past. Kiš’s final definition of Central Europe seems to stem directly from this notion of a historical vacuum:

Why is it when I read the works of Andrzej Kuśniewicz, a Pole born in 1904, or Péter Esterházy, a Hungarian born in 1950, I find something in the way they put things that draws them close to me, a Central European poetics if you like? What is the tone, the vibration that situates a work within that magnetic field? Above all, the inherent presence of culture: the form of allusion, reminiscence, or reference to the whole European heritage, a consciousness of the work that does not destroy its spontaneity, a careful balance between ironic pathos and lyrical flight. Not much. Everything. (111)
Allusion, reminiscence, reference - what Kiš referred to in the essay as “a constant awareness of form” comes closest to an affirmative idea of Central Europe. It is important to stress the existential urge behind the erudition. According to these poetics, each literary work in a way recreates the past world it describes. In the absence of a context, or rather, in a context that is a historical wasteland (remember Miłosz’s ruins and the intertextual polemic with T.S. Eliot) because of the almost complete destruction of the Central European world, the literary work has to provide the context itself. The need becomes acute for the exiled writer who sees himself deprived even of the immediate context of the present, first and foremost his language which provides him with “ethos and mythos, with memory, tradition, and culture, with the impetus of linguistic associations” (112).

It is not difficult to recognize Kiš’s own obsessions with literary form in his definition. From these Central European poetics and their emphasis of tropes it is only a small step to the technique of intertextuality, the extensive use of quotations that is at the core of Kiš’s novels. His intertextuality, which creates a literary Central Europe of its own, a literary space constructed from places as various as Bruno Schulz’s native Drohobycz, the imaginary provincial town of Sárszeg in Dezső Kosztolányi’s novel Skylark, or Krleža’s dystopian Pannonia, is perhaps the most precise illustration of Kiš’s final though reluctant affirmation of Central Europe. That he was perhaps only generalizing from his intellectual and literary obsessions is more than just ceremonial modesty. It lays bare the essentially individualistic aesthetics of his Central Europe — a constellation in which his personal biography — his “Joycean exile” in Paris — links up with his literary ancestors in a common literary realm. The precise status of this realm remains opaque as the essay refrains from a master narrative. Certain is its unfitness for direct political discourse and therefore for the first person plural. Unquestionable is also its individuality, its reluctance to speak for a group of writers delineated either by generation or shared regional background. The comparison with Jewish identity suggests anxiety, fear perhaps, because of the possible political consequences when one distinguishes oneself as a group from the national community.

However, it is the emphasis on individual biographies of writers as the sole ground for the Central European idea, that reveals a fundamental shift in Kiš’s cultural-regional considerations from his first thought on the issue in the late fifties to his final, Central European, period in the late eighties. The notion of the essay — and therefore of the Central European idea — as a self portrait raises the question how the Central European denominator could have acquired such significance for Kiš during the eighties whereas it is absent from his cultural-regional considerations at the beginning of his career. This is all the more relevant since the material upon which both considerations dwell is so similar: the biographies of Ady and Krleža, which represent the bulk of Kiš’s 1958 Paris travelogue. The difference is the following. In 1958, Kiš presented the biographies as historical material somehow separate from aesthetic issues. Speaking from within his Yugoslav imagined community, he could easily dismiss them as responses to national culture and as “things from the past”. The Central European idea of the eighties is much more carefully defined and cannot therefore be equated with his former Yugoslav home. What its precise status was for Kiš can be discerned from a passage that describes one of the Central European biographies in the essay:

Hungarian-Jewish-Czech origins provide a kind of horoscope to the quests and contradictions of Koestler’s life: from Judaism to assimilation theory, from Marxism to the utter repudiation of Communism, from a flirtation with Eastern spiritualism to its demystification, from a faith in science to the mistrust of “all closed systems of thought,” from a search for the absolute to serene resignation vis-à-vis man’s critical faculties. Koestler’s intellectual adventure, all the way to his “ultimate choice,” is
unique even in the broad European spectrum, yet it incorporates the potential biography of every Central European intellectual: it is its most radical realization.

Kiš already admitted that his Central Europe was a self-portrait, that it contained a hidden autobiographical narrative. To this, he adds biography, in this passage Arthur Koestler’s. In *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* (1975), Kiš polemically addressed Koestler’s Marxist phase in an intertextual response to the novel *Darkness at Noon* (1940). Here, he suggests that Koestler’s life story can be considered not just a historical given, but a realization of a potential biography from a given historical background. This biography is related to historical reality as the course of a life to its “horoscope”. The horoscope, a number of given events and circumstances that together make up the context for the course of a life, should be taken with some irony as a reference to Koestler’s final mystical phase. But the phrases “potential” and “realization” designate Central Europe as an imaginary realm which, as soon as its potential is realized, becomes historically significant. For Kiš, this process took place after his emigration from Yugoslavia.

There seems to be, then, an essential difference between Kiš’s and Miłosz’s idea of Central Europe. Miłosz’s is reconstructed on the basis of individual life stories, including the author’s own. Kiš’s Central Europe is the reverse: here individual lives are a “realization of a possible biography”, emanating from the phenomenon Central Europe. As close as these two conceptions may be and as vital as they may be for the history of the discourse of Central Europe, their difference is just as meaningful as their protagonists’ shared membership of the discourse community. It shows a development in the discourse of which we have seen the last phase already: the gradual weakening of the idea of Central Europe, its becoming “hackneyed” during the 1990s. If Miłosz represents the initial phase of the idea of Central Europe, during which the “common past” takes shape on the basis of growing awareness and meticulous historical reconstruction, the next phase – Kiš’s – can already boast a tradition, of shared homelessness. The *apatride*, the man with no fatherland, comes home in the community of Central Europe.

Central Europe’s evolution from historical ruins to a country of the mind is intimately related to the written word. I have tried to show how various modes of putting individual experience into words were probed and finally integrated into this country of the mind, and how the proper name proved both a signpost of the author’s identity as well as an obstacle to communicating to others what is atypical in one’s individual life. Hence Miłosz’s option for autobiographical writing with its fusion of autobiography and biography; hence too his rejection of the novel which, for Miłosz, selects only that what is typical and thus confirms a reality that is already known. How fiction returned and disturbed Miłosz’s clear-cut distinction between autobiographical and novelistic writing, as two fundamentally different ways of dealing with historical reality, is the subject of the following chapter.
Chapter 2

Historical and narratological outlines of a genre.

1. Péter Esterházy’s literary encounters in the nineteen nineties.

The March 1998 issue of Rohwolt’s Literaturmagazin was entirely devoted to the legacy of Danilo Kiš. Friends and kindred spirits presented necrologies, remembering the person and the work of the author who had died in 1989. Kiš’s unsurpassed German translator, the poetess Ilma Rakusa, reflected on the author’s preference for long listings; Claudio Magris, author of the famous Danube travelogue, described his last encounter with Kiš. The necrologies all shared one concern: both Kiš’s biography and his work had to be resituated due to the disappearance of Yugoslav culture. Thus István Eörsi named Kiš “the last Yugoslav writer,” whereas György Konrád had already on an earlier occasion referred to him as “one of us, a Central European”.

Among the necrologies, all of them personal memories, memoirs, and recollections, one piece stands apart. It lacks the nostalgic, almost sentimental tone of the other pieces, and it bears an unusual title: “The I-narrator as a provocateur of the mimetic in the discourse of the fantastic. Péter Esterházy reads Danilo Kiš and Péter Esterházy.” The reader is startled. An example of impersonal academic discourse? No. The author is Péter Esterházy, the writer from Budapest who frequently joined Kiš at the Central-European table: “First I learned about the legend of Danilo Kiš, then I read him and then we met. One could say, I have spent (thus) a whole lifetime with him” (171). The literary form of this necrology, what Esterházy calls “genre-less Danilo writing”, was prompted by Esterházy’s inability in the first place to distinguish between reading, writing and personal acquaintance. Reading had started with a short story from Kiš’s Enciklopedija Mrtvih (Encyclopedia of the Dead, 1983), “Slavno je za otdžbinu mreti” (“It is Glorious to Die for the Fatherland”):

While reading I knew immediately that this was my text, it was mine, let Kiš have the royalties, the text belonged to me. Me-e-e. This was a story that I had to write, moreover: it was I who had to write it, but it was also a story that I was unable to write in this form. Not just because my talent was different from his, but also because there was one word in the text that confused things for me – that confused everything. (172; my trans. after the German edition)

Esterházy is referring to his own surname. In the story it belongs to one of his noble ancestors – Esterházy is heir to the illustrious Esterházyos – who is sentenced to death for high treason by the Habsburgs. Kiš, Esterházy continues, “had written the story for me because I, precisely because I am who I am, could not have written it. This feeling was made even stronger because I (often) have this childish, romantic conception of literature, of a world where there are only books and texts which speak to each other, discuss, help another, dwell together and relate to one another” (172). Esterházy appropriated the story and even read it once at a literary soirée in Eisenstadt “where, as the saying goes, the family nest is”. The audience welcomed the story, he writes, as “a kind of autobiography, in accordance with my intention.” Esterházy even went as far as to incorporate Kiš’s story in his most recent novel Harmonia Caelestis (2000), which takes the game with the author’s own surname to the extreme, over more than eight hundred pages.

Esterházy’s intertextual excursions in the nineties go beyond Kiš, and show strong affinity with other authors from East-Central Europe as well, for instance with the Czech Bohumil Hrabal, who figures already in the title of Esterházy’s novel Hrabal Könyve
(Hrabal’s Book 1990). And beyond Esterházy’s literary encounters, one finds in East-Central Europe a number of texts that, as a result of the appearance of author figures, combine, contrast and blur the distinction between autobiography and fictional autobiography. Besides Esterházy’s *Down the Danube* and Hrabal’s *Book*, Kíš’s family trilogy *Rani Jadi* (1969), *Bašta, pepeo* (1965), and *Peščanik* (1972) (translated as Early sorrows; Garden, Ashes; Hourglass), these include Bohumil Hrabal’s own *Svatby v Domě, Vita Nuova, Proluky*, (Weddings at home, Vita Nuova, Vacant lots, published in 1986 and 1987), György Konrád’s *Kerti Mulatság* (A Feast in the Garden, first version1985) and Witold Gombrowicz’s novels *Pornografia* (Pornography 1960), *Trans-Atlantyk* (Trans-Atlantyk, 1953) and *Cosmos* (Cosmos 1965). The genre is kept alive with the presentation of author figures in Aleksandar Hemon’s fiction *The Question of Bruno* (2000), which links up the decline of Yugoslavia with a central theme of all these texts: the search for alternative, literary notions of home in response to linguistic, temporal and geographical dislocation.

The works mentioned above are highly diverse and I do not wish by no means to diminish their individual complexity for the sake of a generic classification. Yet one can detect a kinship, and not only on the basis of their intertextuality – notably the dialogues initiated by Esterházy’s writings. The phenomenon seems to be more widespread and suggests close ties between the specific narrative form of these works and their contexts – both the contexts in which they were conceived and those of the addressee, which, due to exile and other forms of displacement, often do not coincide. These works are “borderline cases”, then, not only from the point of view of genre and literary form, but also because they were written and often published on a borderline – in between samizdat and official state sponsored culture, in between native culture and the culture of exile. Moreover, thematically all these texts present figures on the margins of history: exiles and inner exiles, neglected by official history and persecuted by the ideologies of the twentieth century, nationalism and communism. I propose to call them – tentatively – fictionalized autobiographies.

From a formal point of view, the presentation of author figures in fiction is neither restricted to the place – East-Central Europe – nor the time, roughly in between 1945 and 1989. The appearance of author figures goes back to the very beginning of the novel as a self-conscious narrative, to Cervantes for instance, or to Fielding’s *Tom Jones*. It is with a wink at this tradition, I guess, that the author Dezső Kosztolányi makes his appearance at the end of his novel *Anna Édes* (1926). Whether one considers it a narrative strategy or a mere joke, it does urge the reader to reflect on the nature of narrated events - fictional or factual? After 1945, it also occurs outside Eastern-Central Europe. Examples are numerous: think of Philip Roth’s *Operation Shylock*, and of the various formal devices in French autobiographies in France, for instance in the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet. In a recent study Jeanette den Toonder discusses a number of hybrid, “autofictional” texts from authors from the Tel Quel group. Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, in “The Life and Times of the Autobiographical Novel” (1986) presents similar texts and calls them a hybrid genre. His perspective seems mostly formal: he defines the genre as “a wide range of possibilities between two ideal types. In one of these hypothetically extreme cases the reader is aware of composition as a separate act of reflection, whereas in the other case, no distance is felt between narrated and narrating self” (83). The examples in this article are mostly Hungarian and American, Péter Nádas, older work by Péter Esterházy and Raymond Federman.

Fictionalized autobiography differs in a number of respects from the above mentioned French and American examples. Its strategy to subject substantial autobiographical material to a contradictory reading pact can be closely related to the specific literary cultures in which they were conceived. Moreover, the way these narratives self-consciously define their difference with the East and the West and designate their place of writing as an intermediate zone, suggests close kinship to the discourse community of Central Europe, and to the
discourse itself. In fact, the authors of fictionalized autobiographies, Esterházy, Hrabal, Kiš and Konrád, all figured in the discourse on Central Europe. How fictionalized autobiography relates to its historical context and how it differs from similar narrative invention in autobiography outside the region, are questions, however, that we can only answer after a close scrutiny of its peculiar narrative form.

2. Fictional or historical lives?

Péter Esterházy dubbed his necrology for Kiš “genre-less Danilo writing”. It is of course far from genre-less, for it combines and contrasts autobiography and fictional autobiography, biography and fictional biography. Its designation could be faction (a fusion of fact and fiction), autofiction, or, in order to highlight the autobiographical moment, even autofaction. Whatever one calls it, Esterházy rightly says that the “hazardous undertaking” of his necrology was “in the spirit of Danilo Kiš’s art” (174). For Kiš’s work is marked by continuous generic disorientation: his *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* saddles biography and fictional biography, his family trilogy autobiography and fictional autobiography.

Why should Esterházy’s intention here be contradicted? Why should we look for generic distinctions when the author bluntly denies them? First of all, because it underlies his style – his irony provokes the reader to grasp the opposite of what the explicit statement says. But more is at stake. Whatever Esterházy presents in his necrology as “genre-less writing” may be genre-less from the point of view of the author’s intention. The reader, on the other hand, will always look for generic designations. As Dorrit Cohn has it in *The Distinction of Fiction* (1999), the reader, consciously or not, reads a text either in one key or the other, either as a work of fiction or as a factual narrative. While nobody doubts that works of fiction are to some degree autobiographical, and that most autobiographies contain fictitious elements (i.e. the author’s erroneous interpretations of his own life; misrepresentations of his own past or memories), these problems of demarcation fail to account for works which intentionally blur factual and fictional narrative.

Let me illustrate this point with an example. During the last stage of his life, Danilo Kiš returned to the central obsession of his family trilogy – childhood. The result was “Life, Literature”, a text of which only twenty pages were completed. Originally, it was intended as “a genre very close to classical essayist dialogues, with a system of free association and yet clearly defined themes and comments” (239). Kiš’s main concern seems to have been to reexamine the images and memories of his childhood and, as his partner-in-dialogue Gleichmann proposed, “to delineate the part played by autobiographical material in your work on the one hand and imagination and illusion on the other” (231).

Kiš presents this at the very beginning of “Life, Literature” as an expression of the autobiographer’s anxiety. The anxiety seems triggered by the extreme character of some memories and can be linked with other instances of it in the region – for instance with the destruction of the family in Konrád’s biography. As Czesław Miłosz wrote in *The Captive Mind* (1953), the Central-European experiences “surpassed the most daring and the most macabre imagination” (87). One could list numerous examples of autobiographical and other factual writings that portray these historical events as unimaginable and sometimes as unrepresentable: Zofia Nałkowska remarks in *Medaillons* (1946), a literary reportage about the Nazi camps in Poland, that one can bear reality “only when it is not entirely known” (34). Likewise, Karło Štajner (whom Kiš personally knew and whose work was a source of his collection of fictionalized biographies in *A Tomb for Boris Davidović*) opens his *7000 Days in Siberia* (1972), an account of his detention in the Soviet Gulag, by expressing his fear that in the eyes of many his experiences shall seem “unlikely and tendentious” (7). Both Nałkowska and Štajner attempted to describe historical facts and events as precisely as possible. They
admitted that sometimes the reliability of their memory may have suffered from the temporal remoteness of the events or their harsh and extreme character (giving rise to fictitiousness). But both authors laboriously try to exclude fictional narration for it would undermine their intention to report accurately. The unimaginability and unspeakability of the events led to what has been sometimes referred to as the "documentary imperative": fiction on the Holocaust and the Gulag that was not based on personal experience had to be grounded on historical documents.

Readers confused by the status of characters and events in Kiš's works may sympathize with the intent of "Life, Literature" to clarify. In this text, author and reader share in an autobiographical endeavour, both are concerned with the historically exact emplotment of real events in the author's biography. However, a reading of Kiš's family trilogy confuses in an entirely different way. While writing the author may have been haunted by the insecurity he addresses in "Life, Literature"; the text, however, has meticulously worked out narrative strategies. The same is true of the other texts discussed here. All these borderline cases focus on traumatic historical experiences and on their effects, and all of them deliberately blend factual and fictional narration. Form and theme are related. To describe this relation one needs to concentrate on narrative form first. For in order to describe exactly how factual and fictional narration are blended and how this specific hybrid form effects reading, one cannot rely on the vague assertion that each autobiography contains "fictional" elements. Intentional generic confusion of autobiography and fictional biography should be separated from the unintentional confusion of events and experience due to faulty memory. In order to do so, one has to scrutinize the workings of genre in these borderline cases before the relation between these two phenomena can be specified, one existentiai and historical, the other literary.

3. Tools from the narratological box

In The Distinction of Fiction Dorrit Cohn sets up parameters to distinguish between fictional and factual narrative modes and two types of confusion between them. Her parameters do allow for the doubt autobiographers may have about their observations or memories – the type Naïkowska and Štajner, both authors of factual narratives, addressed. Cohn's project is (merely) to establish the criteria on the basis of which a reader decides whether the described events in the narrative should be perceived as historical (that is, as part of a factual narrative, subject to a true/false claim, including the truth or falseness of the autobiographer's self-narration), or as imaginary, that is part of a non-referential narrative. The distinction is here between referentiality – referring to the historical reality of verifiable events – and non-referentiality, or self-referentiality – when, to quote Cohn, "the work of fiction itself creates the world to which it refers by referring to it" (13). The definitions, especially the latter, are somewhat academic but their value shall be evident later.

The domain where narratives – both novelistic and historical – center on a life is where factual and fictional narratives come in closest proximity and therefore also the starting point of Cohn's analysis of the distinctions between them (18). It is also the domain, precisely on the borderlines Cohn draws, where the specific forms of fictionalized autobiography have to be situated.

Her first and major distinction is a rigid separation of first and third-person narratives, "as the two principal ways a life can be told: by the self or by the other." Thomas Pavel has pointed out that Cohn may be too rigid here, since "the distinction between first-person and third-person narratives [...] is, of course, a pragmatic one, since it belongs to the deictic system that relates the message to the conditions of its production" (Pavel 20). Pavel's
position might hold true when the narrator is an entity separate from the author, i.e. in fictional narratives. But when they are one and the same, the distinction is not pragmatic at all. This becomes apparent when applied to factual narrative – where a first-person narrative, as self-narration, i.e. autobiography, is in kind a different thing from third-person narration, i.e. biography. In biography, the narrator has access to the subject’s feelings, thoughts or memories only through ego-documents, testimonies, interviews etc.

First person narration lacks definite formal marks of fictionality. Therefore Cohn focuses here on distinguishing the reading of fiction from the reading of non-fiction. Elaborating on Philippe Lejeune’s proposition that readers choose one key or another, that they engage either in a fictional or an autobiographical pact, Cohn takes the proper name of first-person narration as “the principal criterion for differentiating between real and fictional self-narration [...]”, for establishing the ontological status of the speaker – by which I mean his identity or nonidentity with the author in whose name the narrative has been published” (125). Whether author and narrator carry the same name or not, provides a clue for distinguishing fictional from factual self-narration. Thus Karlo Štajner’s 7000 Days in Siberia asks for a factual reading because the narrator has the name of the author and it is of vital importance that the reader accepts the events as the author’s experiences. Lejeune has, moreover, pointed out that the autobiographical pact is not restricted to first-person narratives. Third-person narration may also enforce an autobiographical pact, provided that the name of the protagonist is identical with that of the author.

In the domain of third-person narration, the clue for distinguishing between factual and fictional narration – the conclusion of a so called fictional pact - is when the narrator has insight into the consciousness of other characters (what used to be referred to as “narrative omniscience”). Factual third-person narration cannot do this: when, for instance, Nałkowska asks in Medaillons what kind of people the nazi executioners were (66), she answers with eyewitness responses, for her reportage form, which contains many short biographies of victims, does not allow direct insight into the psyche of the executioners. To be sure, “omniscience”, or what Cohn defines as “transparency”, is a potential of third-person fictional narration, which can be but does not necessarily have to be realized: “the set of devices [for instance: free indirect discourse, G.S.] that allows a fictional text to penetrate to the silent thoughts and feelings of its characters, artfactually traversing a visual barrier that remains forever closed to real eyes in real life (and narratives concerned with real life)” (174).

In most cases, these two signposts decisively establish the text’s genre. Confusion may arise however and Cohn discusses numerous instances in which the borderlines are vague, both in the domain of first-person and of third person. However, even in the face of a number of highly complex ambiguous cases, she sticks to her distinctions, for, she argues, it is only on the basis of clear-cut theoretical distinctions in kind between fact and fiction that one can account for these borderline cases.

In the domain of first-person narration, Cohn, with Philippe Lejeune, distinguishes two possibilities. If not explicitly enforcing either an autobiographical or a fictional pact, a first-person text can be either indeterminate (not providing explicit markers, leaving ground for speculation – mostly these are texts with an anonymous first-person narrator) or contradictory (providing explicit markers that enforce opposed reading modes). In such cases, Lejeune recommends looking at the paratexts, to generic designations like “novel” on the front page, or to interviews where the author reveals his intention. This recommendation neglects, however, the possibility that the author might manipulate the paratext as well. It also negates the truism that authors are interpreters of their own texts like all other readers once the texts are published. Ki’s anxiety in “Life, literature” is a case in point. Leaving the paratext aside, it becomes apparent that the texts listed under fictionalized autobiography are all
contradictory works. Let me shortly introduce the texts and explain why I consider them, from a generic point of view, contradictory.

Hrabal’s trilogy is entirely set in the first person. The author is, of course, Hrabal. The narrator is Pipsi (Eliška), his wife. Hrabal appears again as a character in Pipsi’s account. He is in fact the principal character, since Pipsi’s account is restricted to her acquaintance and marriage to Hrabal. Take for instance the opening of *Weddings at Home*, the first encounter of Pipsi with “doctor Hrabal”: “Dr Hrabal, I said, can you hear me? [...] And yes, the man I addressed took up the scrubber again [...] I saw that this man had blue eyes and that he wiped away his sweat with his hand and he said to me that Mrs. Lizaj had crossed the water, that she would be back soon, that, if I wanted to, I could wait at his place, that he would put a chair near the fireplace” (10, my trans.). Non-identity of author and narrator calls for a fictional pact: the fictional autobiography of Hrabal’s wife. Strictly speaking, the narrator is not identical with the author’s wife for she is a fictional character. The author describes himself through the voice of his wife – and establishes a fictional alter-ego for himself. But nominally, the main character, Dr. Hrabal, is identical to the author. This would call for an autobiographical pact.

György Konrád’s *A Feast in the Garden* is set both in the first and the third person. It starts off in the first person as an indeterminate text – as long as the narrator remains anonymous. In the course of the narrative, the first person narrator is identified by name as the author – even the names of his children are mentioned. But there is the figure of Kobra too, who speaks both in the first and the third person; later on, each character in the novel gets to speak in the first person, beside being presented by the narrator (identified as Konrád) in the third person. There is thus an autobiographical pact (author = narrator), but this same narrator has access to the other figures’ consciousness in the third person (a signpost of fictionality resulting in a fictional pact); and these same figures, when they speak about themselves in the first person, enforce another fictional pact – this time as fictional autobiography.

Danilo Kiš’s trilogy *Family Circus* is perhaps the most complex case of all. The first part, *Garden, Ashes*, is entirely set in the first person and enforces a fictional pact (fictional autobiography) because the narrator, Andreas Sam, nominally differs from the author, Danilo Kiš:

Astonished and frightened, I had suddenly come to understand that I was a boy by the name of Andreas Sam, called Andi by my mother, that I was the only one with that particular name, with that nose, with the taste of honey and cod-liver oil in his mouth, the only one in the world whose uncle had died of tuberculosis the previous day, the only boy who had a sister named Ana and a father named Eduard Sam, the only one in the world who was thinking at that particular moment that he was the only boy named Andreas Sam, whom his mother called by the pet-name Andi. (16; page references are to the Serbo-Croat edition)

The narrator proves, however, unreliable toward the end of the novel, when the father, a survivor from Auschwitz, returns and bluntly denies his paternity, stating that his name is Eduard Kohn, not Eduard Sam.

The second part, *Early Sorrows*, evolves from a fictional autobiography to an indeterminate text. It starts off in the first person, whereby the narrator is again identified as Eduard Sam’s son. The narration gradually shifts to the third person, however, because, as the narrator says, “Let’s keep this in the third person. Perhaps, after all those years, I am no longer Andreas Sam” (40). This change of personality repeats itself as the story proceeds: the shift from first to third person is followed by the new designation “a boy named Andreas Sam”. Finally, all that is left are “a boy” and “the father”, characters whose thoughts the
reader can no longer access. After the father has disappeared, the family leaves the scene of the stories. The perspective then shifts to the boy's dog.

In *Hourglass*, the third and last part, the narrator can no longer be identified as the son – in fact, it is more appropriate to speak of an impersonal narrating instance. The name of the father has been reduced to “E.S.”. First and third person, present and past tense alternate, divided over four registers, each of which takes a different approach to E.S.’s consciousness. “Travel Scenes”, the first register, is set in the third-person and gives limited access to E.S.’s consciousness, that is, his whereabouts are presented with only occasional focalizations by E.S.. Take for instance the opening of the novel, where E.S. listens to his family in the bedroom next door:

Holding his breath, his face turned toward the door, the man listens. Something tells him that the people in the adjoining room are awake and only pretending to be asleep. He waits for sleep to overcome them. He has the feeling that by being awake so close to him (between him and them there is only a flimsy door with a big crack along the bottom) they can influence him by the flow of their thoughts. (8)

The second register, “Notes of a Madman”, is a first person account of E.S.’s state of mind. However, as he is confused, he fails to identify himself as E.S. The third register, “Criminal Investigation”, the only one to use the past tense, is a sequence of questions and answers about E.S, an interview about him. The answers reveal access to E.S.’s consciousness:

What did his own frozen fingers make him think of?
Of Mr. Hordó the butcher’s short, pudgy, bloodstained fingers.
What was E.S. afraid of?
He was afraid that Mr. Hordó might mistake his bloodstained fingers for sausages, cut off one of them, and wrap it up along with the sausages. After that, he stopped buying bloody sausages. (35)

The fourth register, “A Witness Interrogated”, is an extremely long and painful interrogation of E.S. by an anonymous instance:

How do you account for the fact that you went to an Orthodox church and not to the synagogue?
I never went to the synagogue before, and I was not on good terms with the rabbi.
Did you meet anyone other than the persons you have mentioned?
I think I have mentioned all my private cells. (173)

*Hourglass* thus contains: 1) a fictional biography which imitates factual biography by (mostly) refraining from mind reading and which is fictional through the mentioning of the name “E.S.”; 2) first person narrative in which the speaker remains indeterminate; 3) in the third register, fictional biography, because the answers in the interrogations give insight into E.S.’s consciousness, and 4) anonymous and therefore indeterminate first person narrative (in the answers during the interrogation): the names of the speaker and of the interrogator are not revealed.

The narrative is further divided into 67 chapters, which, numbered, cut right through the distinction between the four registers. The last chapter, No. 67, is a letter by Eduard Kiš, i.e. the author’s father. It is a real, non-fictional, historical document, signed “Eduard”. The author pointed its authenticity in a number of interviews he gave after publication of *Hourglass* (see for instance *Homo Poeticus* 206). One is tempted to see the inclusion of this
historical document as a final rewriting of the trilogy, which would add an autobiographical
(or rather biographical – for the author describes not himself but his father) pact by adding the
possibility that behind the “Eduard” who signed the letter, hides the unequivocally historical
“Kiš” – especially since the names of relatives mentioned in the letter are identical with the
names of the relatives in “a witness interrogated”.

Short as it may be, this survey gives some idea of how complex the generic status of
fictionalized autobiography is. I shall dwell in greater length on the texts’ narrative form in
chapter three and four. For now, this survey should suffice in order to address a number of
questions that further explore the nature and especially the impact of the genre’s
contradictions.

Some of the works that I initially listed as fictionalized autobiographies are left out in
the survey. I consider the works of Hrabal, Kiš and Konrád the core of the genre: they
fictionalize their autobiography, that is they invent a narrative form that imposes a double
reading pact on life stories that present a considerable part of the author’s life. They do not
just perform a narrative strategy, a mere trick: their aim is to inject into the protagonist’s story
deep ambivalence. The works of Gombrowicz and Esterházy, which I shall discuss below,
differ in one or more respects.

The question I want to address now is the impact of the genre’s contradictoriness.
How can a reader respond to the double reading pact? How relevant is it in the reception? Is it
more than just a narratologist’s observation?

Before addressing these questions I would like to return, however, to Cohn’s
narratological perspective. One of the virtues of her book is that it does not refrain from
addressing a number of notoriously complex borderline cases, both in the domain of the first
and the third person. Among them are both contradictory and indeterminate texts. It is with
respect to two indeterminate self-narratives, Henry Miller’s Tropic of Cancer (1939) and
Jerzy Kosinski’s The Painted Bird (1965), that she defines her stance with respect to generic
borderline cases: “To me these ambiguous cases indicate […] that we cannot conceive of any
given text as more or less fictional, more or less factual, but we read it in one key or the other –
that fiction, in short, is not a matter of degree but of kind, in first- no less than in third-
person form” (35).

To this I would like to add two observations. First: if the distinction between factual
and fictional narrative is as rigid as Cohn claims, then we would have to conceive of
contradictory texts as fictional, since factual narrative does not allow for such deviations, at
least not without changing into a fictional narrative. Still, fictionalized autobiography does
also enforce an autobiographical pact. Perhaps a historical perspective offers a solution for
this paradox. If for instance free indirect discourse, as Thomas Pavel argues in his discussion
of Cohn’s distinctions, “is itself a result of the rise of modern subjectivity rather than a
universal mark of fictional discourse” (23), than perhaps a similar historical shift in the
apprehension of the meaning of the autobiographer can account for fictionalized
autobiography. In other words: fictionalized autobiography might prompt to redefine the
distinction between autobiography and fictional autobiography.

My second observation follows the same line of argument, only from a geographical
rather than a historical angle. Although processes of globalization have made it increasingly
difficult to speak of separate literary cultures, national and regional differences exist and will
continue to exist. This also goes for East-Central Europe. Even if 1989 loosened and redrew
many of the political boundaries, this does not mean that the region’s cultures of reception
have become identical to those, say in France or the United States. Specific features of these
local literary cultures might account for fictionalized autobiography’s specific form. Below, I
discuss some of these specific features.
Czesław Miłosz, whom fictionalized autobiographer Konrád came to look upon as the father of “the Central European tribe”, praises in his 1986 essay the literature of Central Europe for its “specific tone and sensibility, not to be perceived elsewhere” (99). What works he is referring to remains unclear, however. In Year of the Hunter (1994), a diary Miłosz kept during the years 1987-1988, he mentions the Lisbon roundtable, including a list of the participants from East-Central Europe. But there is no record of extensive readings of the works of the Central European authors – no reference to Konrád, to Kiśl or to Hrabal. He repeatedly mentions Polish authors, first and foremost Witold Gombrowicz. Gombrowicz died in 1969 and therefore was not around to join the discussion of Central Europe. Born in 1904, he is usually listed among the three great Polish avantgardists - the other two being Stanisław Witkiewicz and Bruno Schulz. Gombrowicz ended up in Argentina in 1939 and stayed there until he left for Europe in 1963. He spent the remaining years of his life in Vence, southern France, and never returned to Poland.

In Year of the Hunter, eighteen years after Gombrowicz’s death, Miłosz feels uncomfortable when thinking of his figure and work. He calls him “disturbing” and confesses that next to Gombrowicz, he sometimes feels like “a polite little boy who believes in a dear little God, who tries to avoid sin [and who] encounters an uncivilized rascallion who sticks out his tongue and thumbs his nose at the authorities of two millennia” (213). Miłosz’s discomfort is relevant to fictionalized autobiography, because part of it, I suggest, stems from his objections against the narrative strategies Gombrowicz applied in his fiction. They are strategies that opened up generic plays with the figure of the author, as well as with his biography, from which Miłosz as an autobiographer himself refrained. Moreover, Gombrowicz’s choice for this kind of narrative – about which more below – seems to shed light on Miłosz’s own doubts on how to tell one’s own experience against the background of the twentieth century.

Like Konrád, Kiśl and Esterházy later on in the eighties, Miłosz and Gombrowicz personally knew each other. They maintained a dialogue in exile on literature and intellectual life in letters and in essays. The starting point seems to have been Miłosz’s The Captive Mind (1953), which receives an approving response in Gombrowicz’s Diary. Episodes from the Diary were published regularly in Kultura and so a correspondence between the two started. Miłosz’s most passionate and animated discussion of Gombrowicz’s work occurs in The Land of Ulro (1977), written after Gombrowicz’s death. Contemplating Gombrowicz’s work in its historical context of the twentieth century, Miłosz writes:

My blood runs cold when I pronounce the words: the twentieth century. Vast territories of silence. In the din of language, in the millions of words per minute, in the excrecence of press, film, and television, there looms another, unmediated reality; and the first, which is mediated, cannot keep pace with the second, even less so than in the last century. The matter of which I speak is known to all who have felt awed by the passing of historical moments, situations, climates; of people and even of whole nations; and I was one of the many who, having lived it firsthand, regret they were able to capture so little of it. Its intractable nature (by now engrained in us) destroyed the idea of the novel as a “mirror in the roadway”; and instead of pursuing the truth of our epoch in a horde of “realistic” novels, which somehow repel by their falsity, we have recourse to the fable, poetic distillation, metonymy, or we shun art and literature altogether in favor of memories and nonfiction. [...] Gombrowicz, who was nurtured in the decades between the wars, would have plodded away at the realistic or
psychological novel had he not vaulted into the realm of clowning. And, as in the case of Witkiewicz, that clowning act proved closer - even if unfaithful, abstract - to reality. [...] This may explain why I prefer his Diaries to his novels and plays, because there, in the Diaries, he [Gombrowicz] reveals himself at his most imperious, his most openly and cheerfully pugnacious. (The Land of Ulro, pp. 41)

We recognize Miłosz’s obsessions with the distinctiveness of the twentieth century, its cruelty and its contempt for human life, all of which he was to see later as the breeding ground for a specific Central European historical imagination. As someone who “lived it firsthand”, he sees an enormous challenge to literature. He formulated this with regard to Gombrowicz and his own case (opting for poetry) as a generic dilemma. As in his discussion of Central European literature, he names no specific works. It is obvious, however, that he is setting up an opposition between autobiography and fiction. Diary is his preferred genre for there Gombrowicz “reveals himself [...] at his most openly pugnacious.” His novels and plays are said to represent a “vaulting into the realm of clowning.” What Miłosz means by clowning might be inferred from what he ascribes to the opposite pole – the Diary. By implication, Gombrowicz does not “reveal himself at his most openly pugnacious” in novels. Miłosz’s concern, then, is obviously with Gombrowicz’s personal experience and with the various ways in which he makes a narrative out of it. A short comparison of the narrative form of Gombrowicz’s Diary and of his novel Pornography reveals that both probe the formal limits of their genre (resp. factual diary and fictional autobiography). As a historical preamble to fictionalized autobiography, they offer an option in narrative invention from which Miłosz refrained when he abandoned prose and opted for poetry.

Gombrowicz’s Dziennik (Diary), conducted between 1953 and 1969, is what its title suggests, in spite of its meddling with narrative voices and with the sequence of events, experiences and their emplotment. The work is seminal, for in response to exile it refuses victimization or, for that matter, any role that locates the author in a realm seeking its raison d’être outside literature itself. Apart from its thematic importance – celebrated, for instance, in István Eörsi’s Időm Gombrowiczcsal (Days with Gombrowicz, 1994) – I take it here as seminal for its refusal to accept the laws and conventions of the autobiographical genre.

The central voice, the protagonist, of the Diary is the first person pronoun. The I performs many roles: of the Polish exile, who writes in the Spanish culture of Argentina but lives simultaneously among the Polish émigrés publishing the magazine Kultura in Paris; of the author Gombrowicz, who comments upon his own writings, interpretations triggered by critiques from readers and critics; and of the pseudo-philosopher, who invents and develops a peculiar theory of form that is both distilled from and tested by the author’s fiction. All these I’s follow the events in the author’s life. As a diary – a direct reflection on daily life in Argentine (later Berlin and French) exile, the text cannot but respect the sequence of real life events that dictates the narrative. Initially, the generic conventions of diary writing are instrumental in breaking through the silence of exile. In Berlin, reflecting in 1964 on the first years of Argentinean exile, Gombrowicz writes:

Alone, lost, cut off, alien, unknown, a drowned man. My eardrums were still being assailed by the feverish din of European radio speakers, I was still being assaulted by the wartime roar of newspapers and already I was immersing myself in an incomprehensible speech and in a life quite remote from my former one. Which is what is called an uncommon moment. A silence like that in a forest, a silence such that one hears even the drone of a tiny fly after the commotion of the previous years, makes a strange music – and in this ripe and overwhelming silence, two exceptional,
singular, specific words began to make themselves audible: Witold Gombrowicz, Witold Gombrowicz. (III:141)

Eventually, however, the first person’s privilege for the author’s memories and experiences becomes blurred. Another voice, in the first-person plural, makes its appearance, distinguished from the rest of the text by italics. The discourse soon becomes biographical; its sole purpose seems to avert the threat of soliloquy. The text now issues both from the figure of “Witold Gombrowicz” and his impersonal biographer, whose discourse on the author figure re-enters in the third person singular:

The only thing he could manage for the time being was the introduction of “a second voice” into the Diary – the voice of a commentator and biographer – which allowed him to speak of himself as “Gombrowicz,” through someone else’s lips. This was, in his opinion, an important discovery, intensifying the immeasurably cold artificiality of his admissions, which also allowed for greater honesty and passion. And this was something new, which he had never encountered in any of the diaries he had read. (II:157)

But soon, when Gombrowicz returns to Europe in 1963, the voice of the biographer disappears. Yet the autobiographical pact is still effective: the biographer is just one among Gombrowicz's voices and has no privilege over the first person. He can, for instance, ridicule the first-person narrator for his naiveté but he is bound by the rules of the factual autobiographical game. He can change voices, but he cannot tamper with the fundamental narrative genre of his text: a diary has to be written in response to daily life. As such, its natural end is the author’s death. The final passage of the Diary contains a last attempt to defy to the ontology of autobiography. Gombrowicz describes how he purchases a villa in the south of France and how he decorates it while settling in. He mentions an illegitimate child that has suddenly been discovered in Argentina. The episode is invented as Rita Gombrowicz certified in an interview with Paul Beers, Gombrowicz’s Dutch translator. Only by moving to the paratext does the reader find out that the episode is invented. The text of the Diary itself, in which Gombrowicz “does not want to lie too much”, gives no clue whatsoever to this.

Gombrowicz’s novel Pornography confronts the reader at its very opening with the “experience” of the first-person narrator: “I shall tell you about another experience I had, undoubtedly the most fatal of all. In those days, I was staying in former Poland, in former Warsaw at the depths of the fait accompli” (6). Thus begins the narrator who calls himself later “I, Witold Gombrowicz, the writer.” The story of this text, designated as a novel, is set in Nazi-occupied Poland. This time-space constellation would pass unnoticed, were it not for the identity of the narrator, who is said to be also the main character and the author of the novel: nominal identity enforces an autobiographical pact. At the same time, we know from the Diary that the author was not in Poland during World War II; in fact he never returned to Poland after his departure in 1939. Yet the character Gombrowicz plays a crucial role in this strange tale of manipulation and betrayal. He and his friend Fryderyk, two aging men, travel to the countryside to visit friends and become erotically obsessed by a young boy and girl. A second story line treats the themes of resistance and heroism. One member of the resistance, Siemian, becomes unreliable and has to be executed. When no adult is willing to perform the deed, it is finally carried out by the two youngsters, manipulated by the narrator and his friend.

Though the narrator, the author, and the protagonist are all called Gombrowicz, knowledge of the author's life prevents us from reading the text as an autobiography. And yet the narrator takes every opportunity to make the “writer Gombrowicz” responsible for what
happens. Thus Siemian, about to be executed, addresses the I: "It’s my last chance. I’ve come straight to you because a man in my position has no choice. [...] I can only get out by taking a leap and that’s why I’ve come to you in the middle of the night, although we don’t know each other… You’re an intelligent man, a writer, try to understand, give me a hand, help me out” (118). Siemian’s insistence that the narrator is the author urges us to consider an autobiographical pact – however ironic. How are we to read it then? Gombrowicz surely chose the form deliberately: by the time Pornography was published, his Diary regularly appeared in Kultura, describing in detail the facts of the author’s life. His fictional return to Poland in Pornography seems in the first place a provocation – as, indeed, much of the author’s work was read by the Polish exile community as provocative. But much more is at stake. In spite of Siemian’s desperate request, there is no metafictional moment, the author Gombrowicz does not intervene in the fictional events as a deus ex machina, he is bound by the rules of the game. “All situations in the world are figures” (41), the I says, suggesting that someone somewhere holds the key. But his search for a truth that is unknown to him at the outset makes him an accessory to crime, one that is subjected to the “pornographic” rules of this fictional universe.

The novel thus prompts the reader to move the author near the narrator, without turning the text into an autobiography. It explores the distinction between the two. This ambivalence confuses the reader’s perception of the events from the outset. When space between author and narrator is minimized, one seems to be dealing with an account of the author’s fictitious, dream-like return to Poland; when maximized, it relates a fictional autobiographer’s imaginary journey. No definitive indication is given as to which reading should prevail.

One scene beautifully illustrates this ambivalence. Prior to Siemian’s execution, the I enters in the night the garden, which is, together with the house, the novel’s dominant narrative space:

I went into the garden […]; guessing at the alleys rather than seeing them, treading them with the audacity of unconsciousness, and only the occasional familiar silhouette of a tree or a bush told me all was in order and that I really was where I thought I was. At the same time I realized that I was not expecting this immutability of the garden and that it amazed me… I would not have been surprised if the garden had been turned upside down in the dark. This thought made me pitch like a skiff on the high seas, and I realized land was already out of sight. […] Every bush, every tree appearing on my path was an assault of fantasy - because although they were as they were, they could have been different. (144-5)

The I is disoriented here. Read as fictional autobiography, the passage describes his effort to orient himself in the fictional Polish universe of the novel; the comparison “like a ship at open sea …” is a self-reflection of the fictional I; read as an autobiography, evoking the earlier quoted silence of the “forest” in the Diary where the author found himself after he left Europe, the comparison can be read, however, as the author’s metaphor for his own displacement.

It is, then, this fictional Gombrowicz whom Milosz considers the clown and above which he prefers the Diary’s factual Gombrowicz. Milosz is far from a naïve reader: he seems well aware of Gombrowicz’s diarist tricks and deceit. He goes as far as to admire him for it, although he rejects Gombrowicz’s aesthetics of play with the author figure. I take Pornography as a model, Cosmos and Transatlantyk are similar in that they are first-person narratives where the narrator has the name of the author, and both too are obvious fantasies. Gombrowicz’s alternative solution to the failure of the (realist) novel to address the
extreme trauma’s of WWII lies in his blurring of factual and fictional narration; in combination with the author figure it leads to a novelistic form that is to Miłosz clownish rather than scandalous or offensive. The clown is a lighter form of playing, the clown cannot ridicule, he cannot give offence to his audience. Therefore, in the eyes of Miłosz, he is inferior to the author-player in the *Diary*.

Miłosz believed in the possibility of authentic testimony. To be sure, his preoccupation with his means of expressing his own experience, his hovering between poetry, autobiography and even the fictional novel, furnishes ample evidence that he knew about the perils of testimonial writing. Gombrowicz’s *Pornography* can be read as a challenge to Miłosz’s assumption that factual narration should be privileged over the fictional one. Nevertheless, I would argue that this fantasy of participating in the war tracks the boundaries of fictional autobiography but does not transgress them. For that, the events in the novel are too obviously fictitious, the claim to historicity too obvious a farce, even though the narrative form adheres to the genre of autobiography. Nobody could seriously think that Gombrowicz was actually there as the protagonist of his novel – and precisely here lies, I submit, the origin of Miłosz’s reservation with Gombrowicz’s peculiar novelistic form: it fails to give authentic offence.

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5. Péter Esterházy echoes Miłosz’s critique – but which Péter Esterházy?

If Gombrowicz can be taken as the beginning, or rather the prelude to fictionalized autobiography, Esterházy’s work from the late 1980s and the early 1990s can serve as a self-proclaimed post scriptum. Esterházy concluded his necrology of Kiš with a passage on their acquaintance. This passage, a few pages long, is taken from Esterházy’s novel *Hahn-Hahn grófnő Pillantása* (The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn. Down the Danube, 1991). The novel tells the story of an imaginary journey down the Danube. It takes as one of its themes the discourse on Central Europe, but unlike György Konrád’s *A Feast in the Garden*, the novel is a satire. Several members of the discourse community, Konrád and Claudio Magris, and also Timothy Garton Ash and Milan Kundera are present. Parody and satire are maintained up to final exchange: the narrator’s desperate question to Magris, author of the famous travelogue *Danubio*, “how one can finish a Danube-novel like this” and Magris’s frivolous response, “one should pump out the water from the Danube” (259).

The narrative form of the novel seems what Esterházy himself would call “genre-less writing”. In fact, like the necrology, most of the novel is narrated in the first-person (with occasional leaps into the third-person); throughout the novel, the narrator remains anonymous. At various instances, however, he considers the possibility of revealing himself to the reader, but refrains from doing so. This becomes somewhat of a running gag. Parody is thus not limited to the discourse of Central Europe but also embraces narrative strategies, of blurring the distinction between factual and fictional narration, and of casting author figures in fiction:

> I could say, I am Madame Bovary, I could say, calling for attention, P.E. – c’est moi, or I could say, this I is not a fictional character, but the novelist, an erudite, bitter, disappointed man, I – but none of these makes my heart beat faster, and I do not cross my fingers for “him” to wish him well. (138-39, my trans. after the German edition)

One could link the narrator’s refusal to identify himself with the author to Miłosz’s diagnosis of Gombrowicz’s fictionalizing strategies as clownerie. Seen from this perspective, Gombrowicz’s novel can be taken as the beginning, and Esterházy’s novel as the end of the genre. There are, however, two major differences between Miłosz’s stance and that of Esterházy’s narrator. First, Miłosz responded to a narrative that called for an autobiographical
pact while presenting events that were obviously imaginary. Esterházy’s narrator ponders identifying himself with the author in a narrative that presents an episode of the author’s life – those parts in which the members of the Central European discourse community figure. This illustrates the difference between the much older strategy of presenting author figures in fiction and the specific case of fictionalized autobiography. Cervantes having a character called Cervantes making an occasional appearance in Don Quichote; the appearance of the writer Kosztolányi as personage in the last chapter of Anna Édes. Gombrowicz’s Pornography takes the trick to the extreme, but the difference is merely quantitatively: the author figures throughout the narrative as a protagonist.

With this difference, based on the content of the narrative, we have moved away from the strictly formal narrative perspective that Cohn provided. In a way, we have shifted to the paratext, to speak with Lejeune, for that is where we find evidence of Esterházy’s participation in the discourse community, including a record of his stance with respect to the idea of Central Europe. Narratologically, Gombrowicz’s Pornography casts its author figures like in fictionalized autobiography, but its content differs: unlike fictionalized autobiography, it does not present large portions of autobiographical material. For Milosz, who regarded the status of personal experience crucial, this would have mattered greatly.

The second major difference between Milosz and Esterházy is that the former expresses his views in an essay, which does not allow generic confusion affecting the author’s opinion, whereas Esterházy expresses a view by means of a narrator who narrates under the ambiguous reading pact he himself is criticizing. This would clarify why Esterházy continued to experiment with author figures and proper names throughout the 1990s.

The epilogue to Esterházy’s Danube-novel represents thus a threefold farewell: to Danilo Kiš, to the discourse community of Central Europe, and to the genre of fictionalized autobiography. What are the implications of these three farewells for the historical and geographical boundaries of the genre?

As he stated in his necrology for Kiš, Esterházy “casts Kiš into fiction” in his Danube novel. Kiš, however, only appears toward the end, when confusion reigns and it has become impossible to speak of plain “fiction”. The Kiš figure enters through an encounter with a character called Rentee, who is commissioned by a Renter from the United States to report about his Danube travels in telegrams. The year is roughly 1989. Rentee travels down the Danube but the cultural space of his travels is mainly Central Europe: he reads and quotes famous Danube travelers from the past and reflects upon the idea of Central Europe. Reaching Budapest, the journey reveals itself as bookish, as the imaginary journey of a writer who sits in his Budapest room and reads books about the Danube and Danubian culture. The extensive chapter on Budapest, called “La Città Invisibili” turns the two characters, Renter and Rentee, into variations on Marco Polo and Kublai Khan in Italo Calvino’s novel with that title (1972).

Esterházy’s novel opens, however, with an anonymous first-person narrator who recalls how he traveled in the fifties from Hungary to Austria. The both ecstatic and humble responses to his surname, which is never made explicit, suggest that we are dealing here with an heir of the illustrious Esterházy family. The irony to fictionalized autobiography is obvious: it recalls the fading name of the father in Kiš’s trilogy, who was first Eduard Sam and then only E.S. Esterházy’s narrator says that a family name can also be too familiar to be mentioned: “To me, everything is family history” (12), laments the protagonist. A certain Roberto, an uncle who accompanies him, seems caught up in some obscure espionage activities, and leads the I through several meetings with persons, all of whom turn out to be fictitious in the end – that is, like in the case of the Renter and the Rentee, the narrator explicitly states that all of them have been invented.

The first-person narrator then reveals himself as being the same as Rentee – whose whereabouts are narrated both in the first and the third person: “I am he who drags his feet
between buffet and telephone cell, more precisely: he, whose name is ‘I’, and that is all you know about him” (97). The device of casting author figures into fiction – or rather, of linking up a fictional narrator with the figure of the author – is presented here as frivolous, as a narrative trick. This critique, linked up with the satire on the Central-European discourse community, results in a reading which questions the regional specificity of Central-European literature, which, as we recall, was one of the main pillars in the claim that the region was distinct. The key chapter in this respect, “La Città Invisibili,” borrows extensively from Calvino’s Invisible Cities, this classic of postmodernism that celebrates the replacement of a historical urban space by an imaginary one. It serves here as a cultural-geographical counter model to that of the Danube. Esterházy’s strategy is to take over the structure; but unlike Calvino’s cities his Budapests are crowded with historical personages and concrete stories and anecdotes, mostly stories from the recent past. Esterházy’s narrative thus maintains the Danube travelogue up to the traveler’s homecoming, but there the regional metaphor explodes into a multitude of spaces imagined by means of a work from outside the region.

Esterházy’s fictionalized autobiography thus seems to contain an implicit critique of the idea of Central Europe, for its abundant use of literary models that are not restricted to the region undermines regional specificity of the discourse on the region. This critique permeates also the novel’s notion of family. The speaker’s tenuous adhesion to the illustrious Esterházy family, whose possessions were expropriated by the communist government, seems to contrast Kiš’s model of the marginal Sam family in Family Circus. Both families are in their own way victims of history. The novel’s irony reaches its highpoint when the I/he and the Kiš figure are offered membership in the family of Central Europe: Kiš is called “the brother” of Rentee when he enters the novel.

Fictionalized autobiography and Central Europe are both enmeshed in family ties, relations of kinship – which, as the narrator in the novel implies, seem the only ground to consider them a genre. Esterházy stresses the randomness of this family; of the Danube model, of the idea of Central Europe, and even of the narrative devices of fictionalized autobiography. However, as I will show below, precisely these narrative devices, in combination with the choice for thematic material from the author’s life, gave the genre its sharpness and, to some extent, its power to offend.

6. Generic ambiguity gives offence – the reception of Kiš’s A Tomb for Boris Davidovič

Among the generic borderline cases that originate in the literary cultures of East-Central Europe, one text lead to a heated debate between critics who felt offended for various reasons: Kiš’s A Tomb for Boris Davidovič (1975). The case is instructive, first, because the ambiguous narrative form was probably partly responsible for the offence, and secondly, because of the still obscure nature of the offence and its relation to the specific type of ambiguity in the text’s narrative form. Its controversial reception, by now amply documented, accentuated the potential effect of generic ambiguity.

A Tomb for Boris Davidovič consists of seven self-contained short stories, told by a dispassionate researcher, a kind of biographer, who examines partially real, partially invented historical documents. Based on his research he reconstructs the biographies of the protagonists, all of whom participated in the Russian revolution from the very beginning, to fall victim to Stalin’s purges later on. Kiš fictionalizes historical biographies by taking much of the material from Karlo Štajner’s documentary memoir 7000 Days in Siberia; the stories present imaginary characters (their names are invented) within historical events. The narrator emphasizes the historicity of the biographies; moreover, he refrains from mind reading, thus further confirming the biographical pact. I would call the stories fictionalized biographies.
It takes, however, some patience and a number of interpreting moves to get to the heart of the matter. First, because *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* is fictionalized biography, and not autobiography. Second, because the reception of the book was conditioned by the political situation prevailing at the time. Serge Shishkoff, who published in 1987 an excellent account of the affair, which lasted from 1975 until 1979, ascribes the extremely opaque and obscure course of the affair to the specific literary culture of Tito’s Yugoslavia, “where nothing is what it seems to be, where there is more to everything than meets the eye, where more information is gleaned from what is not said than from what is, and where rumor, nurtured into an art form, is the chief source of information (and misinformation)” (342).

When one reads Shishkoff’s analysis bearing in mind the Yugoslav war in the 1990s, and especially the conversion of much of Belgrade’s literary establishment (where the campaign against Kiš was conducted) from pro-communism into pro-nationalism, the affair deserves perhaps less wit and more cynicism than Shishkoff allows. Vasa Mihajlovich in his 1994 prolegomena to Shishkoff’s article says it is “an intelligent guess that [the affair] contributed to Kiš’s early death from cancer in 1989” (169). Sure is that the affair strengthened Kiš in his decision to leave Yugoslavia and to go into his “Joycean” exile in Paris. The fact that he adopted there the discourse of Central Europe, proves once more how directly opposed to endemic nationalism the discourse was — and also perhaps, how much fictionalized autobiography responded to (or rather: against) national literary culture.

In 1978, Kiš was summoned to a Belgrade court to defend himself against charges of plagiarism. This was not the real issue at stake, however. Things had started in 1975, a few months after the publication of *A Tomb for Boris Davidović*, when Kiš was accused of plagiarism: he had allegedly copied the plots and many of the descriptions of the stories. The accusation was absurd — not that Kiš hadn’t copied, but he had done so consciously, even stating many of the sources in footnotes, performing nothing more or less than the widespread practice of intertextual writing. Precisely because of the absurdness of the accusation, Kiš was convinced that other literary and political motives lurked behind the farcical accusation. In 1978 he published an extensivedefense of his fiction, a collection of essays and polemics entitled *Čas Anatomije* (Lesson in Anatomy). From the accusers’ articles as well as from Kiš’s response, the motives behind the accusations and the grounds for the offence can be reconstructed.

The stories in *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* were offensive first because of their critique of Stalinism. Tito’s Yugoslavia had been embroiled with Stalin ever since 1948; but now it appeared that some of its pillars, notably the myth of the Russian revolution, was still a taboo. That Kiš and his defenders identified the accusers with the dogmatic communists is obvious from their allusions to the practices of the secret police and Zhdanov-like conduct.

Secondly, as one of the accusers formulated, artists who plagiarize do “great harm to a nation’s culture”. In other words: Kiš, by plagiarizing, had offended national culture. What was precisely the offence against national culture, i.e. Serbian culture — is hard to say in the opaque Yugoslav context of the nineteen seventies. However, nationalism was undoubtedly a salient factor in the ideological landscape of the decade. It appears that Kiš had bred bad blood with his fierce anti-nationalist essays from the early seventies, published right after he finished *Hourglass*. In *Lesson in Anatomy*, he refers back to this earlier essay, quoting it at length.

About these two points both Kiš and his defenders agreed. About the third, anti-Semitism, there was no consensus. Kiš himself was convinced that anti-Semite motives lurked behind the accusations. In *Lesson in Anatomy*, he amply explains his understanding of Judaism and adds that “in Boris Davidović, like in my earlier books, it [Judaism] is only the effect of de-familiarization” (56). In the same passage he declares himself a Yugoslav,
meaning a “non-nationalist writer”, “like Borges, like Koestler” in a tradition of “homelessness” *(beskućništvo)* (54).

Much more could be said on the issue of anti-Semitism. Vasa Mihajlovich mitigates Kiš’s claim of anti-Semitic motives: “If they [the accusers] harbored any anti-Semitism, it existed only on the unconscious level; they would vehemently deny it, and one would have to take their word for it” (171). I am on the one hand inclined to agree with Mihajlovich because no direct expression of anti-Semitism was made. On the other hand, I find it important in support of Kiš’s view and to understand his stubborn insistence on anti-Semitism, to stress the conviction of Serbian nationalists that anti-Semitism never played a part in their ideology. This has become a dogma and is rooted in the national myth that Serbia has always offered a shelter to Jews - often in contradiction with the historical facts. The point is that critics found it hard to believe that anti-Semitism played a part in the accusation because they a priori believed anti-Semitism to be non-existent in Serbian history.

Kiš’s understanding of Jewishness as an “effect of de-familiarization” recalls his definition of Jewish identity in his Central Europe-essay, as an etiquette given by the “others” – for which Kiš used Sartre’s definition of Jewish identity. If we understand Jewish identity as another instance of an identity imposed by others, first and foremost by the nation, it becomes less important whether exclusion and hatred were directed specifically against Jews, it rather draws attention to the mechanism, inherent to nationalism, of exclusion itself. What matters here is that Kiš’s understanding of Jewishness in *Lesson in Anatomy* links *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* to E.S., the central figure of the family trilogy. At this juncture of political and literary culture, we can reconstruct the role of Kiš’s narrative form in the polemic around *A Tomb for Boris Davidović*.

The ties between the two texts are manifold. The most obvious one is the use of ambiguous proper names in both books: their instability suggests the way in which grand ideologies rewrite, alter, or completely erase individual biographies. The novella about Boris Davidović opens with the remark: “History has remembered him under the name Novski, which, undoubtedly, is only a pseudonym (more precise: one of his pseudonyms). But what raises doubt from the very outset is: has history really remembered him?” (83; my trans.) The second point concerns Karlo Štajner: he already made his appearance in *Hourglass*, where he is said to have met with E.S.: “Karlo Štajner from Zagreb, who in 1937 had disappeared without trace, somewhere in the USSR” (*Hourglass* 81). The passage occurs in the section “Criminal Investigation” – which I have characterized as fictionalized biography. In *A Tomb for Boris Davidović*, one of the novellas is dedicated to Štajner; Kiš’s narrative quotes extensively from Štajner’s memoirs, taking the events from the survivor’s factual narrative as the building stones of his fictional biographies. Thirdly, both texts have historical documents at the heart of the plot. The Gulag stories show an evolution away from the complexity and the often painstaking texture of *Hourglass*, which reminds the reader of the Nouveau Roman. Yet, the narrative technique applied in both narratives is very similar: in both cases contradictory generic markers enforce a double, both fictional and factual reading pact.

If the narratives are so similar, the question becomes why *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* aroused such a stir and why *Hourglass* did not. With respect to the sensitivity of the thematic material, one could say that the effect was cumulative, that the affair was a consequence of Kiš’s conscious oeuvre building. The connection between the two texts as documents about victims of two different totalitarian systems was obvious, and Kiš never made a secret of his intention to connect the two. By adding Stalinism as a major crime to the holocaust, writing a historical version of Borges’ *Universal History of Infamy*, Kiš had not only offended old apparachiks but violated the founding myth of Tito’s Yugoslavia that claimed that the whole Yugoslav nation had collectively, under the banners of Titoism, withstood fascism.
Here narrative form comes into play: the shift from autobiography to biography. The family trilogy, although large sections of *Hourglass* are fictionalized biography and not autobiography, remains thematically within the author’s life. In a way, both form and theme of the trilogy made Kiš untouchable. Working in a literary culture, as he writes in *A Lesson in Anatomy*, where “literature is still interpreted outside the text, and outside its context” (Čas 30), he wrote about victims of fascism and did this in such a meticulous way, opting for the imaginary setting of Pannonia (see chapter three) that those who were offended by the focus on lives on the margins of official history, could believe that for instance the pogrom described in *Early Sorrows* was the doing of Hungarian fascists and not of “our own brethren” – if not confirming, than at least not offending the Titoist myth about the second world war. Moreover, the autobiographical pact that permeates the whole trilogy and which is confirmed by the letter from the father at the end of *Hourglass*, made it clear that here was someone who was first and foremost interested in his own family history; even more so, who had been himself, as a child, a victim of the political extremism that the Titoist ideology called “fascism”.

Not so in *A Tomb for Boris Davidović*. Here the narrator had not only opted for sensitive thematic material, putting the Gulag alongside to the nazi extermination camps, but he had narrativized it in an ambiguous way: on the one hand, he presented characters with imaginary names, on the other hand, there was abundant proof (furnished by the narrator) that these were highly probable biographies from a historical point of view. Kiš drew attention to this in his defense. Contemplating the motives of his critics, he writes:

What in the world does he (that is D.K.) have to do with all that when he never was in a concentration camp himself [...] So, I supposedly “changed states”, meaning that I no longer know where I am living and what I am doing, so why do I not write other things and not the things about which I am writing, because when I was still working on my family trilogy, which was strange too, meaning, not “ours”, at least I wrote something that didn’t have anything to do with us [...] (Čas Anatomije 20)

One can thus say that the Gulag stories gave immediate rise to the polemic but that the attacks were implicitly directed against the trilogy too. At stake was a combination of historically sensitive thematic material and ambiguous narrative form. The family trilogy violated the convention that sensitive issues should be narrativized in testimonies, autobiography or memoir and not in an “exotic” literary form. To this, *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* added the insult of addressing experience other than the author’s own. Both were guilty of intentional ambiguity in the relation author-narrator-character.

Both in the case of Kiš’s fictionalized autobiography and his fictionalized biography, the documentary imperative played an essential part. In the first case, it protected the author. Generic ambiguity in the family trilogy prevented the critics from identifying the author with the narrator and from subjecting his biography to the Yugoslav myth of collective martyrdom. In *A Tomb*, it was the bone of content – the author’s audacity to address experience that was not his own. Both receptions were extreme cases and perhaps characterized the specific literary culture; a culture in which Kiš knew generic ambiguity together with sensitive subject matter would be only either totally accepted or totally rejected. Thus generic ambiguity served him to cross the boundary between literature and historiography and to challenge some of the myths the latter had generated. At the same time, it added documentation to fictional narration, thus giving it the historical basis necessary to challenge historical myths.

Outside Yugoslavia there was no offence whatsoever. The work was translated and received abundant praise. Although in the West, especially in France, Kiš presented *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* and its implicit equation of Nazism and Stalinism as a critique of many
Western intellectuals’ fondness of the Soviet political experiment. The theme of the Gulag had already been imbedded and accepted as a public discourse in French intellectual life after Solzhenitsyn’s *Gulag Archipelago* (1973). At least as important however, I would say, was the diversity of the intellectual debate. Kiš, in spite of his ambivalent stance toward French intellectual life, indulged in this diversity, witnessing his own éloge in “Paris, Great Kitchen of Ideas” (1982). In France, I suppose, after the innovations of the nouveau roman, fiction was more or less supposed to be experimental and to cross the boundaries of the traditional domain; moreover, historiography took place in a similarly diverse environment that was certainly politicized but lacked the censorship that gave Kiš such a hard time.

These different receptions in Belgrade and Paris points to what is perhaps a more general difference, between East-Central European fictionalized (auto)biography and its Western counterparts. Where literary life is relatively autonomous, at least not under direct political control – whether this control is exerted through censorship or self-censorship or both – narrative invention and generic ambiguity passes (relatively) unnoticed or, when noticed, is judged on aesthetic grounds. When literary and political life are closely connected, formal issues, together with thematic sensitivity, can cause the political stir which *A Tomb* arose.

7. Fictionalized autobiography enters the 1990s: the cases of Konrád

Eastern-Central European fictionalized autobiography is thus closely connected to literary cultures where censorship was just one aspect of what I would call a monoform context. On the other hand, diversity, institutionalized distinctions between the domains of history and fiction, characterized the literary cultures of the West. When, in 1989, the Berlin wall came down, and together with it the walls that had divided the literary cultures of East-Central Europe into the reality of exile, of samizdat and official, state-sponsored culture – part of this monoformity disappeared. Hence, perhaps, in Esterházy’s Danube-novel, the diagnosis of casting author figures in fiction as a strategy which after 1989 seems no longer actual. In his necrology however, when Esterházy recalls how he appropriated one of Kiš’s stories, he does make mention of the affair Kiš had to endure in Belgrade:

I am a well-mannered person, so I wrote to Paris, I did not ask for permission, but simply informed that I was about to take away the text as it obviously belonged to me. The addressee wrote to me that I was free to do so and that I could do him a favor too, about which he, however, made no further mention. We acted from the beginning as if we were old acquaintances. I did not know at the time that my undertaking meant *das hängen des Henkers*, I did not know about the great plagiarism scandal, the *Lesson in Anatomy* was unknown to me, I did not know that my gesture was a Danilo-Kiš-gesture, a paraphrase, a caricature. (We afterwards did not have the opportunity to discuss this seriously, although not his thought but his feeling would have interested me.) (173)

As an essayist and necrologist Esterházy seems as ambiguous about these devices, tricks, strategies of casting author figures, play with the author’s surname, as in his Danube-novel, where, as we recall, the device was rejected but nevertheless permeated the text from the outset. Parody, caricature – what we are faced with here is the phenomenon of a narrative device that is repeated in a changed context, a changed literary culture. At first sight, Esterházy repeating Kiš’s gesture is mere parody, or clowning, to speak with Milosz. His discovery *afterwards* that he had not just copied someone else’s story but by copying it, had touched a nerve which escaped self-irony, might have persuaded him of a potential of the
strategy that was yet to be laid bare – proof of which furnishes his recent *Harmonia Caelestis*. It is not accidental that precisely in the post-Yugoslav literary culture of the nineteen nineties, this potential is further explored, for instance by the Sarajevo-born, now Anglophone Aleksandar Hemon. Post-Yugoslav literary culture continues traditions of exile and inner exile in opposition to the new monoform national cultures that emerged from the nineteen eighties – a development which runs counter to for instance Czech, Polish and Hungarian literary culture.

Thus, whereas, the genre of fictionalized autobiography, like the discourse of Central Europe, seems thoroughly affected by the changes of the year 1989, the strategy of casting author figures is kept alive in the nineteen nineties. Esterházy has been offering a (continuous) post scriptum to the genre; György Konrád continues to practice too, although his case is not the double act of repetition and rejection inherent in parody, but rather unambiguous repetition. The case of Konrád deserves closer scrutiny since he is the sole Central European to apply the Central European discourse in the post-1989 context, and also to continue to fictionalize his autobiography.

"I am writing my most hazardous book" says the narrator in the beginning of *A Feast in the Garden*. "Hazardous writing": the notion also occurred in Esterházy’s necrology. There it referred to "genre-less Danilo-writing". Here too, in Konrád’s novel, the risk seems to concern generic invention, this time in a novelistic project. Above I characterized *A Feast* as a contradictory text which enforces both an autobiographical and a fictional pact. That was a simplification: since its first samizdat edition, the novel has gone through at least three versions, all of them different in a number of fundamental respects, and yet all three of them obviously stem from the same pretext from a thematic point of view, concerned with the author’s biography.

From the first samizdat edition published in 1986 to the first public edition published right after the political changes in 1989, Konrád thoroughly altered the novel. The most recent edition is still a fictionalized autobiography, but the fictional part has been considerably extended and the autobiographical portions (that is first person discourse under an autobiographical pact), considerably diminished. Thus whereas the novel did not change qualitatively, quantitatively the fictional part became dominant. From the point of view of narratology, which is concerned with formal and qualitative issues, this is irrelevant. As a reader of a recent work of literature, in a rapidly changing context, however, one cannot deny that such changes are significant.

Let me first state that I do not intend to contemplate the author’s motives. It is a well known fact that Konrád loves to rewrite his work; also, much of the changes might be ascribed to his aesthetic ideal of the novel as an open, never ending text. Although interesting, it is irrelevant to what I shall seek to do here: to detect the differences among the versions and to describe the further evolution of the device of fictionalizing one’s biography. With regard to Konrád’s intentions I would once more evoke the truism here that once published, the text lives a life of its own and the author can only come back to it as a reader. Any significant change renders a new text that has to be treated as an independent whole.

As I have no access to the original, the three versions under scrutiny here are the following: first, the 1986 German edition, based on the Hungarian samizdat edition of 1985. Second, the Dutch edition of 1987, based on a revised Hungarian samizdat edition. Third, the 1992 United States edition, based on the first official Hungarian edition of 1989. The edition currently available in Budapest seems again slightly altered, but I shall limit myself to the ones listed. When referring to the three editions, I will identify them by the year the translations were published, that is; 1986, 1987 and 1992.

First the genre from a narratological point of view. All three versions enforce a contradictory reading pact. There are differences, but these seem negligible since all enforce
the autobiographical pact by identifying, at one point or another, the anonymous I as Konrád. What is different in each version is the relation between Konrád and his alter ego, David Kobra. In the 1986 edition, Kobra is introduced in the second chapter, in the third person. He gets to speak in the first person only later on. In the 1987 edition, the metanarrativity is made explicit: the imaginary character Kobra is “born” from the author: “Do you want to be good or bad? The author asked. Bad of course, Kobra said, roaring with laughter” (20). Kobra speaks here from the outset both in the first and in the third person. In the 1992 edition, Kobra is distinguished from the author; immediately after his “birth” he gets to speak in the first person. The “author” is, moreover, identified as “K.” which only enhances the ambiguity – even when leaving aside the historical reverberations, it adds additional play to the already highly complicated narrative situation: one has to assume that a third instance, next to the author-character and the Kobra character, pulls the strings.

The three different endings of the novel are significant too from the narrative point of view. The 1992 edition is here revealed as an altogether different novel: it concludes with the first person discourse of the fictional characters Melinda and Dragoman, who are absent from the first two editions. The 1986 and 1987 endings are very similar, however: both end in the garden where the novel also started and which serves as the place of writing throughout the narrative, the locus of the author where the imaginary characters are born. Both endings are with an anonymous I – confirming the contradictory reading pact. In the 1987 edition the I is alone: his female companion Regina has left him so that he can write his “incestuous” book. In the 1986 edition she accompanies him.

When following how the Regina character developed in the three editions, an overall pattern emerges about the kind of change the novel went through. In the 1986 and 1987 editions, she is both a factual and a fictional character, both linked to the autobiographical I and the fictional Kobra. In the 1986 edition she is with the anonymous I from the very outset, sharing in the autobiographical pact, only to make her fictional appearance in the second chapter, where she is re-introduced with Kobra in the third-person; there, her mind is transparent, accessible to the narrator’s gaze. In the 1987 edition, she first appears next to Kobra, that is, as a fictional character, only to appear as a factual character next to the I when the latter is identified as “Konrád”, that is, as the figure of the author.

Leaving the formal narrative criteria aside, more seems at stake with Regina. It appears that she, gradually, becomes a more abstract character. What I mean is that she in the 1986 edition has a specific profession (a literary translator and historian doing research); she travels with “Konrád” to Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia; moreover, as mentioned before, she stays with the I until the end of the novel, where he starts the writing of his “incestuous book”. She is thus part of the metanarrative. In the 1992 edition, she has altogether moved to the space inhabited by the imaginary characters. She seems no longer connected to the I who was identified as “K” nor to “Konrád”. Thematically, she has been reduced to the role of Kobra’s female companion.

There, she is part of what has become in the 1992 edition the bulk of the novel: the family web in the midst of which is David Kobra. This family history is what I meant when I stated that the fictional part of the novel had become dominant in the quantitative respect. The 1986 and 1987 editions juxtaposed two biographies: the author’s, stating in full the facts of Konrád’s experiences in world war II and during the 1956 uprising, and Kobra’s, which partly overlapped with Konrád’s (more or less in the same manner as they shared their mistress), partly added imaginary material. The family that emerged from that imaginary material became the full focus of the 1992 edition, and reappeared in the subsequent novels Konrád published in the nineteen nineties.

My conclusion would thus be that although I subscribe to Cohn’s assumptions that one reads either in the fictional or the factual key, it nevertheless is a fact that what indeed started
as a text that was fully contradictory from the generic point of view, became after two rewritings a narrative that, at least from the qualitative point of view, was still contradictory. Quantitatively however, the fictional pact covered most of the events and characters, transposing them from an ambiguous to a plain imaginary level.

To this one more observation should be added: the status of the discourse on Central Europe in the novel. All versions contain extensive passages, even whole chapters, which seem paraphrases of Konrád’s essays on Central Europe, in that peculiar evasive style which drove political chronicler Garton Ash almost crazy. In the 1986 and 1987 editions these essays are carefully placed in between the author and Kobra, in between passages under autobiographical and fictional pact. Especially the 1987 edition: it contains a chapter (“In this house one can find everything”) of which the first ten pages are in anonymous first-person discourse and which suddenly leap into Kobra’s first-person discourse. In the 1992 edition, the Crown café, where David Kobra writes every day as an “écritain public”, is unequivocally said to be “in the heart of Central Europe” (12). It is also this café which contains much of Kobra’s family history. The imaginary space of the text, under fictional pact, becomes Central European space. This is different from the earlier editions, where the discourse of Central Europe, the idea of being neither East nor West but something in between, was a borderline identity which was not just confined to fictional space. It was crucial to the whole text: it gave ambiguity to the location of the garden, to the generic status of the author’s biography, and also to very narrative form(lessness) of the novel as such, and thus coupled the geographical, the aesthetic, and the biographical notions of borderland.

The author’s biography, the formlessness of the novel, and the garden were all Central-European interstices; now, that is, in 1992, only the fictional part is Central European. The 1992 edition further alludes to the Central European discourse community but places Kobra among its ranks, not Konrád (277). Where is the author, that is Konrád, or K., situated in this spatial constellation? Because Kobra has taken over the Crown café, the author Konrád seems confined to his place of writing, the garden, the location of which is explicitly given in the opening chapter of the novel, in the countryside outside Budapest, “Here, on the hill of Ófalu, I have found my observation post, my point of departure” (4). His coordinates coincide with those of the author-essayist Konrád, in his “Self-Introduction” to his 1995 collection of essays The Melancholy of Rebirth, where he gives a short biography of himself, not making any mention of Central Europe at all. What he does do is to narrate his biography in the third person, and to refer to himself as “K.”:

A fifty-seven year old novelist and essayist. His citizenship and native language are Hungarian, his religion Jewish. His father owned a hardware shop in the provinces; his mother is alive and well. He has four children by two marriages. He is by training a teacher of literature. His wife, Judit Lakner, is a historian. He lives in a three-room-plus-study apartment in the garden suburbs of Buda and owns a run-down house in the country. His wardrobe is modest, though he has several typewriters. (vii)

Following Lejeune’s and Cohn’s parameters, this prose would qualify as autobiographical— even third person narration can enforce an autobiographical pact, provided that author and character bear the same name. And of course it is autobiographical. Yet we also know to estimate the proper name reduced to a single consonant at its true value: one can, as “P.E.” does in his Danube-novel, reject it and then still play with the idea. Or one can, as Konrád does, speak through it not just in the imaginary world of fiction but also in the historical world of the essay, leaving one’s public in utter confusion as to the status of one’s fiction as well as to the meaning of one’s political statements. Either way, the single consonant proper name has proven capable of giving fiction the weight of the historical content of the author’s
biography; to factual autobiography, it adds possible biographies that go beyond the given data of a historical life.
Chapter 3

Imaginary-historical space: Pannonia

1. The oceanic feeling and the Pannonian backwater

A 1983 edition of the French magazine Actuel presented a questionnaire about the “magical place” and “the worst rathole I visited.” The answers were never published. A short prose with the improvised title “A i B” (A and B), found among Kiš’s legacy, was a response to this questionnaire. Text A leads to the landscape of the bay of Kotor, Montenegro. It does so in the form of a Baedeker, but the itinerary is poetic and not factographic: “It should be a beautiful day, but it is also necessary that there are some white clouds in the west, which look like a herd of white elephants” (299, my trans.). In this imaginary space, the traveler receives another indication, which identifies him as the son of a father who once went the same way: “And you have to know for sure that your father came along this way, by bus or by taxi which he took in Kotor, and you have to be certain that he watched the same view [...]” (299). If these conditions are fulfilled, the traveler will experience “what Koestler called the oceanic feeling.” In a post scriptum the itinerary style is dropped and the narrator speaks in the first person: “My father watched this same view the year 1939 (five years before he disappeared in Auschwitz), and Mr. Sigmund Freud the year 1898, who afterwards dreamt his famous dream about the three Fates” (300). The reference to Koestler is to his novel Darkness at Noon (1940) where the main character, Rubashov, awaiting his execution in a Gulag death cell, watching the blue sky, remembers his childhood and undergoes the “oceanic feeling”. The oceanic feeling links Koestler to Freud, to the opening of Das Unbehagen in der Kultur (1930), in which the psychoanalyst responded to Romain Rolland, who had argued that the “oceanic feeling” was the basis of the religious emotion. The reference to Freud in A and B, however, leads to the traveler Freud, whose visit to the city of Kotor he recorded in his Traumdeutung (1900). There, discussing his dream of the three Fates, he recalls an encounter with a merchant in Split (Freud uses the Italian place name “Spalato”), through whom he remembers a negotiation with a Serbian merchant in Kotor (“Cattaro”). He recalls that he was aloof and that the transaction did not succeed: he failed to purchase the object he wanted. He sees the dream therefore as an “offenbarer Hungertraum” (240).

A thus brings together the historical-imaginary realm of Kiš’s A Tomb for Boris Davidović – which polemized with Koestler’s novel – and the autobiographical-fictional realm of Kiš’s family trilogy, in which the father is the main character. In fact, this is the first time Kiš would name directly the historical fate of his father. Throughout the whole trilogy, there is no direct mention of his father’s deportation. He comes closest to it in Garden, Ashes, when the father returns as a survivor from Auschwitz but then he denies his paternity. This space is quintessentially Central European: Kotor, as a historical meeting point, brings together various biographies: that of his father, which in Hourglass is set in “Central European time”, that of Sigmund Freud, and that of Arthur Koestler, whose career Kiš in his Central Europe essay called “the potential biography of every Central European intellectual […] its most radical realization.”

The somewhat overcrowded space of A contrast sharply with the deserted, dingy house described in B. This is a short but meticulous description of a space well known to the reader of the family trilogy: the room where the Sam-family ends up after their social decline and before they leave for Montenegro – without the father. This is also the space in which the opening of Hourglass is set, where the reader is presented in full with the father’s thoughts. Now it is empty, deserted. This description too is a journey; it is not an itinerary, however, but an accomplished visit narrated retrospectively in the first person:
"Here shall be a monument," says the man [who drove me here from Budapest] ironically when we have left the place. 'On it shall be written: HERE LIVED THE YUGOSLAV WRITER D.K. FROM 1942 TO 1947.'
'Luckily, it shall be torn down', I say." (302, my trans.)

"And B" thus brings together the two dominant spaces of Kiš's imaginative work: Central Europe and Pannonia, the setting of his family trilogy. The short prose was written during the time Kiš lived in Paris. Central Europe, we recall, was to Kiš the place where "he had moved spiritually." Now it appears that the figure of his father moved with the author Kiš, resorting from Pannonia to Central Europe where he joined the ranks of Kiš's Central European icons of homelessness in the nineteen eighties, like the apatride, the man without fatherland Egon von Német, modeled after the playwright and novelist Ödön von Horváth.

Like Central Europe, Pannonia too is a space of homelessness. In Kiš's trilogy, it is the décor of the wandering father. The topography of the trilogy is carefully prepared: throughout the trilogy, there is no mention of names of countries, of national borders (which the family must have crossed during its wandering), not even of the provincial towns in the Danube basin between Belgrade and Budapest where the Kiš family lived. And it is in this anonymous space, only referred to as Pannonian, where Kiš situates the personal holocaust of his family. Throughout the trilogy, Pannonia is in fact the only stable name, whereas proper names and family names change or erode to the point of anonymity. Central Europe (as in "E.S. arrived at the station at … hours, Central European time") occasionally appears on the margins of Hourglass.

Central Europe was for Kiš a cultural and political project. As a supranational cultural network, it emphasized common traits of various national cultures and had a strong utopian element. One could say that his Pannonia is a dystopian space, because it brings together the shared negative historical circumstances of the region: persecution on ethnic grounds and extreme nationalism, resulting in the exclusion of those individuals who, according to nationalists, belong nowhere. Central Europe affirms a shared experience of homelessness; Kiš's Pannonia gives the dark side of this, the individual experience. It would go too far to speak of a full dichotomy utopia-dystopia: for that the Central Europeans, Kiš not excluded, were too well aware that their rewriting of history in terms of Central Europe centered on neghative experiences such as persecution, destruction and homelessness.

Much of Kiš's Pannonia is intertextual: there is abundant reference to the Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža, in whose work Pannonia is a dominant toponym in between the two world wars. This chapter shall explore Krleža's Pannonia before it shall discuss Kiš's. By doing so I do not mean to suggest that Kiš simply extended Krleža's Pannonia. The differences between the two are perhaps more significant than the similarities. The similarities are that both for Krleža and for Kiš, Pannonia was a borderland where various competing national cultures met. Both writers were, moreover, fluent in Hungarian and took a great interest in Hungarian letters. The difference is that whereas Krleža considered Hungarian literature basically from a national Croatian paradigm, Kiš grew up truly in between two nations and two languages. His Pannonia is a space of homelessness but focalized by homeless characters.

Thus both Pannonias are geographically more or less identical, and both share an interest for the same Hungarian writers. But their focus is fundamentally different; this difference, and the shift from a national to a supranational perspective, is the main theme of this chapter. The personal and imagined encounters of Krleža shall lead us to Endre Ady and to Dezső Kosztolályi, the poet and writer from Kiš's place of birth Subotica/Szabadka on the Hungarian-Yugoslav border.
Finally, Kiš’s Pannonia is important for matters of genre. In Krleža’s work (both in non-fiction and fiction), Pannonia signals a critique of national identity: history as written in the Danube nation states has failed to record crucial historical experience. His Pannonia offers an alternative national history. Kiš’s Pannonia, as I will show, also brings back a repressed past: the Jewish past before assimilation. The father lives in Pannonian space, the son, who is also the narrator, doesn’t. Their conflict is not just about whose space is real and whose is imaginary. It is about Jewish identity and about assimilation as a response to being excluded from the nation. Rivalry between their spaces is decided on the generic level.

2. Historical Pannonia: overcoming the loss of a center

Nowadays, a search for Pannonia on the internet results in countless hits, all of which are more or less related to the tourist delights of the Danube basin in between Budapest, Belgrade and Zagreb — for obvious reasons most of them restricted to Hungary. Thus one comes across numerous restaurants and hotels, also on the Western side of the Austro-Hungarian border. The sole contribution from Kiš’s former country seems “Panonka”, (the Pannonian housewife) a reminder of Titoist workers’ self-rule in the Vojvodina, Yugoslavia.

Pannonia has previously been the focus of comparative research in two studies by Zoran Konstantinović, who suggests the usefulness of Pannonia as part of the so called “Europäischer Zwischenfeld” (European Interstice), as a cultural space that includes topographical aspects of Romanian, Serbian, Croatian and Hungarian literature. My concern here is not with Pannonia as another alternative concept that takes together several literary traditions from the Danube basin; nor with an alleged historical-geographical background which, among others, bore the name Pannonia, but with the toponym itself and the political, cultural, historical and literary mapping of the spaces it connotes. When György Konrád writes in The Melancholy of Rebirth about Central Europe that “no matter what we call it and whether or not we speak of it as such, Central Europe was, is, and probably will continue to be. Like the Danube, which existed long before it was called the Danube” (156), this may hold true from Konrád’s perspective. Pannonia is in geographical terms part of Danubian space. However, when one focuses on the intention of the speaker (as Konrád’s intention in applying Central Europe is political) in its interplay with other, previous uses of the toponym which are not just political but historical and literary, a wholly different kind of mapping emerges. That mapping is my concern here. Perhaps one of the historical distinguishing features of the East-Central European region is the frequent shift of proper names and toponyms — Milosz makes a similar point with respect to personal proper names. Pannonia is a different realm from Central Europe: it is a space on the margins and never evolved into a self-conscious discourse with a political agenda.

Like the notion of Danubian culture, Pannonia too selects elements from physical space and constructs a particular, one-sided image of the physical surroundings. There is a more or less fixed geographical map which covers the plain between the mountainous regions of the Balkans and the Julian Alps, veined by the Danube, Drava, Sava and Tisa (Tisza) rivers. The former Pannonian sea, a tide–land ever since some distant glacial epoch, is still apparent in swamps, in mud. The toponym, the etymology of which is uncertain, is first mentioned in the classical age. Up to the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, Pannonia was the name of the northern Roman Balkan province. The Enciklopedija Jugoslavije mentions “Panonci”, “Pannonians”, as a people ethnically close to the Illyrians (a people with whom modern Albanian nationalism claims ethnic kinship), but culturally different. Subsequent migrations of Slavs and Magyars, their christianization, the schism between the Roman and the Byzantine Church and the presence of the Ottomans, created an utterly
confusing cultural landscape in which the toponym Pannonia occurs and re-occurs through the ages, seemingly without a coherent meaning. It occurs in the age of humanism, during the rise of modern nationalism, and, finally, as a marginal though highly suggestive toponym in 20th century Serbian, Croatian, and Hungarian fiction.

As diverse as these instances are, they all share the notion of decentering which is present from the very first mention of Pannonia. The poetry of the Latinist and humanist Iannus Pannonius (Jan Panonije, Ivan Čezmički, 1434-1472) displays strong nostalgia for ancient Rome and the poet’s longing for contemporary renaissance Italy seems inversely proportional to his aversion to Pannonian backwardness. After the Turkish seizure of Buda in 1541, at the time Pannonia’s political center, the anthology *Pannoniae Luctus* (The Light of Pannonia), celebrating Iannus Pannonius as the initiator of Pannonian culture, is published in Krakow in 1544. This time the decentering is a response to changes on the contemporary political scene. Already then, Pannonia existed as a cultural space next to a Danubian discourse community: the Sodalitas Litteraria Danubiae which Conrad Celtis (1459-1508) founded almost simultaneously in Vienna and Buda (see Birnbaum 52-53).

When Pannonia occurs again three centuries later, national consciousness has redecorated the cultural landscape under the influence of Herder’s ideas about language and literature as the nation’s fundament which in the Pannonian realm reverberate both in Hungarian, Serbian and Croat national awakening, giving rise to sometimes competing, sometimes cooperating cultural movements. From now on, Pannonia shall be politically on the margins. The Slovene linguist Jernej Kopitar (1780-1844) formulated his Pannonian-Slavonic theory during the rise of national consciousness among the South-Slavs. The theory had hardly anything to do with the Latinist heritage. It was embedded in a moderately pan-slavic, historical linguistic discourse that (wrongly) claimed Pannonia as the native soil of Church Slavonic, the archaic Slavic vernacular used in the Orthodox Churches. The theory was refuted later, but at the time it was embedded in a powerful discourse. Kopitar was the official censor of Slovene books in Vienna, as well as *custos* of the Vienna Court Library. He mediated between South-Slavic philologists and ethnologists such as Vuk Stefanović Karadžić (1787-1864) and key-figures of German culture such as Wilhelm von Humboldt and Friedrich Schlegel. Conceived in a wider context of Austro-Slavism, his theory might very well have been the source, through mediation of Jacob Grimm, of the term “altpannonisch” used by Goethe to refer to Church Slavonic in his well-known review of Serbian folk poetry (415). Simultaneously to Kopitar’s theory, Pannonia occurs in a national Hungarian context. Gábor Kerekes mentions a poem attributed to the ethnic German poet Karl Antun Gruber, “Pannonia’s Sprache” (Pest, 1806), which is an ode written in German to the Hungarian vernacular and its poets.

Pannonia occurs once more in early twentieth century poetry. The Hungarian poet Mihály Babits describes Pannonia as connected throughout the ages with Italian culture. The Croat poet Vladimir Vidić returns in his poem “Ex Pannonia” to the classical age in his use of metaphors such as Charon and the Styx. Pannonia entered anthropological discourse with Jovan Cvijić’s *La Péninsule Balkanique* (French original 1918, Serbian edition 1922). Cvijić describes Pannonia as a particular “géographie psychique” that constitutes, together with the Dinaric, Central and Oriental Balkan types, an ethnic South-Slav (“Yougoslave”) identity. It becomes part of the Serbian-centered Yugoslav discourse that, at the time, attempted to unite the South-Slavs on ethnic grounds.

Cvijić was an honorary doctor at both Charles University in Prague and at the Sorbonne. He published his study during the final phase of the South-Slav political unification, which was accomplished in 1918 with the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. Cvijić himself propagated the idea of a South-Slav nation as specialist-delegate in the territorial commission of the Yugoslav delegation at the Versailles peace
conference. Here, as in the case of Kopitar, a powerful discourse at the intersection of political and academic life is involved. However, whereas Kopitar's discourse was pre-national, Cvijić's is national and is an important contribution to the creation of a national identity in what was in fact a multicultural context, the Yugoslav one, whose various stages were to have a predominant influence on the topography of South-Eastern and East-Central Europe in our century. Pannonia, marginalized as a sub-category of the Yugoslav "géographie humaine," would probably have disappeared from the short memory of South-Eastern European culture, had Krleža not revived it.

Claudio Magris in his Danubio rightly discusses the work of Krleža under the heading "Pannonia". He discusses Kiš, however, in the context of Novi Sad, many pages downstream the Danube. Recent mention of Kiš's Pannonia occurs in Mirko Kovač's Kristalne Rešetke (Crystal Bars, 1995). Kovač situates his imaginary return to Belgrade and to his ex-friends from Medijala, a group of poets and painters to which Kiš also belonged, in Pannonian space. Here, Krleža is again entirely absent. This chapter wants to fill the gaps in the intertextual dialogue that Kiš conducted with Krleža.

3. Krleža's Pannonia and the crisis of the nation

In the work of Miroslav Krleža (1893-1981) Pannonia features, roughly, during the period in between the two world wars. Krleža lived successively in the Habsburg monarchy, the two Yugoslav Kingdoms in between the two world wars, and in the Federative Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia. Pannonia first appears in travelogues and essays and is then transposed to fiction, where it occurs on the margins of Krleža's imaginary Croatian bourgeois family, the Glimbajs, portrayed in a number of plays and a collection of novellas. Pannonia is the dominant space in the novel Povratak Filipa Latinovicza (The Return of Filip Latinovicz 1932). Its occurrence seems, moreover, related to Krleža's attempts to define an individual aesthetic realm that was to present an alternative to Croatian national culture as well as to the Marxist dialectic interpretation of local culture. In Krleža's work, Pannonia has therefore strong political implications: it is a space where the individual collides with the collective and where the artist faces the moral need for engagement – or Tendenz as it was called in the interwar jargon. Like Marxist internationalism, his Pannonia transgressed national borders; like the national community it was preoccupied with the memory of local history and regional culture. Krleža's Pannonia is distinguished, however, by its emphasis on alienation and homelessness. Significantly the toponym (but not the related questions about culture in the European periphery) disappears almost entirely from Krleža's work after the establishment of the Socialist Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia. The founding of the republic after the second world war not only marked the institutional shift of Marxist ideology to the political center, but also, effectively, pushed Krleža to the center of Titoist cultural politics, and with him his individualist conception of Marxist aesthetics, at the expense of socialist realism.

Krleža's Pannonia, as it appears in his writings in the early nineteen twenties, is a dystopian space and is identified by a number of elements that form its physical reality. The Pannonian sea is transformed into the swamps of the monotonous plane between the Pannonian rivers, Sava, Drava and Danube. Water is present in the sound of raindrops marking moments of time, in non-mechanic, pre-modern clocks such as clepsydras and hourglasses, and in the fog and the birches. Descriptions of the seasons seem an inversion of the idyll: dirtiness of snow in winter, heaviness of sunlight in summer. A frequent passer-by is a blind man, a veteran from the Great War, playing the harmonica. Only dogs respond to the sound of church bells. Time always evolves towards dusk, never towards dawn. Pannonia is a rustic space filled with ruins from the Habsburg era, with the ruins of bulwarks against the
Turks, with monuments of the counter-reformation, and, hidden under the muddy surface, small sculptures, often only shards, dating back from ancient Roman times. This emphasis on almost exclusively physical spatial elements points to a gloomy experience of history. As a transition zone, Pannonia was often the locus of battles that defined Europe’s political borders. As such, it was always subjected to, and itself never the subject of history. Krleža’s Pannonia constructs a negative history, a history of ruins, anti-monuments, which are sometimes reminiscences of past cultures but mostly mere remnants of destruction.

4. Krleža as a traveler in Pannonia

The first boundary Krleža crossed by resorting to Pannonia was the one set by the so-called Illyrian movement, the nineteenth century Croatian national cultural revival which, among its virtues counted the construction of a national Croatian language. In “Pjesma iz hrvatske krćme” (Poem from the Croatian dive, 1921), Krleža first used the phrase “Pannonian mud” (237) in a programmatic poem which emphasizes the provinciality of Croatian letters. Krleža’s main reproach is the gap between the Illyrians’ conception of Croatianhood and the actual historical reality. The ferociousness of his attack may be due to the polemical nature of his character; it is certainly also triggered by the Illyrians’ language policy which, by opting for the Stokavian, ignored the Kajkavian dialect, thereby excluding the vernacular literature of Krleža’s hometown Zagreb and its rustic surroundings. The phrase “Pannonian mud” occurs again in “Pismo iz Koprivnice” (Letter from Koprivnica, 1925), when Krleža reflects on Croatian-Hungarian relations, and on Croatia as antemurale christianitatis. Instead of emphasizing Croatia’s historical victimhood, he denies the local rural surroundings their historical uniqueness by comparing them, first, to Brueghel’s pictorial version of early sixteenth-century Brabant, and secondly to the former Habsburg province of Galicia. Defining Pannonia as a peripheral space, he even denies the town of Koprivnica its urban character: “A hospital, a district council, a town hall and a library are built around these stores, and this is then what is called, in our circumstances, restricted by our modest requirements, a Town” (249; my trans.).

At this stage, Pannonia is for Krleža mainly a space meant to contest the Illyrian conception of Croatian national identity. There seems for him no conflict between Pannonia and Marxist internationalist conceptions of political, historical, and cultural space. In Islet u Rusiju (An Excursion to Russia, 1926), Pannonian space is extended to span the eight states of East Central Europe established after World War I. Here, the narrator’s internationalist spirit is inclined to Marxist historical-materialism. It rejects what it calls “decadent capitalist culture” and sees the Komintern as alternative: “One returns out of the brothel of Europe into the ‘Pannonian’ zone, from the southern to the northern Balkans [...], using eight rolls of barbed wire, the League of Nations has separated the Balkans from Russia” (35; my trans).

Here, both the internationalist Komintern and Krleža’s use of Pannonia are a direct reply to nationalist cultural-territorial claims. The years following the journey to the Soviet Union revealed, however, a deeper tension. At a closer look, Krleža’s discontent becomes apparent already in An Excursion to Russia. His concrete experience of Soviet society seriously challenged his communist convictions. Like Walter Benjamin in his Moscow travelogue, Krleža devotes many passages to his own highly subjective impressions. The chapter “Ulazak u Moskvu” (Entering Moscow), for instance, does not glorify the revolutionary city but focuses on the narrator’s apparent unease, which he tries to overcome by reflecting on the decisive role of the senses in his childhood memories. Later on, Krleža does concentrate on the new Soviet society, but by then he has already spent a considerable time writing about his impressions of Berlin, and of Lithuania. Both the Lithuanian political state of affairs and the local countryside remind him of Croatia, and although he mentions
Pannonia in quotation marks his description of “Lithuanian Pannonia” contains several elements that we have identified as the physical landscape of his Pannonia. Still, the account of the journey to the Soviet utopia is permeated with discourse that reflects the official point of view of the Yugoslav communist party. The result is a strangely ambivalent text.

How different in this respect is the short travelogue prose “Ljudi putuju” (People Traveling), published in Evropa Danas (Europe Today, 1935). Europe Today is a typical example of pamphletist literature, a fusion of journalistic reportage and literary essay. Written nine years after the Soviet travelogue, “People Traveling” no longer displays official Marxist discourse. The traveler in “People Traveling”, like the traveler in An Excursion to Russia, travels by train through an amorphous zone. The amorphousness seems rooted in the indefinable culture of the East-Central European region, which, in the historical context of the twenties and the thirties, meant the patchwork of nation states created in 1918. The anonymous narrator travels in the presence of people whose disagreements, quarrels and anti-Semitism display a state of utter linguistic and ideological confusion. Krleža’s gaze is, however, no longer colored by the official view of the Party. “People Traveling,” in contrast to An Excursion to Russia, shifts to an imaginary space. The inside of the train, with the narrator and the passengers, is an actual setting: facts about the historical reality enter the narrative through the radio and newspapers. The outside space, referred to as “Pannonian,” is highly suggestive: it is dark and threatening and, more importantly, it is empty, a kind of void, looming at the border of Europe. The destination of the train is not revealed. Not only does the ideological confusion grow as the train moves eastwards, searching its way through Pannonia, it is also adrift and suggests historical disorientation instead of historical teleology.

The difference in focus and spatial orientation between the two travelogues indicates the shift in Krleža's political affinities. First an admirer of Lenin, he dedicated to him his early play Kristofor Kolumbo (Cristobal Colon, 1918). He then became increasingly critical of the new Soviet society, and he engaged in the so-called sukob na ljevici, the conflict on the left in Yugoslav letters. This involved fierce polemics in the 1930s between the surrealist movement on the one hand and dogmatic advocates of socialist realism. Krleža took an active part in these polemics and wrote a large number of essays and articles in which he attempted to define aesthetic principles that were both engaged and based on his individual artistic talent. Krleža’s involvement in the polemic generated a stream of publications on Tendenz in the arts. In an essay on the painter Krsto Hegedušić, “Podravski Motivi Krste Hegedušića” (Introduction to Krsto Hegedušić's Drava Motives, 1933), Krleža reflects explicitly on his own use of the toponym Pannonia through the years. He quotes two instances, right at the heart of a plea for the freedom of individual artistic expression. He quotes at length his own “Letter from Koprivnica” from 1925. The letter suggested that here, in this backward provincial town, he realized the resemblance of contemporary rural reality to Brueghel's pictorial version of early sixteenth-century Brabant, and to Galicia. He concludes his essay by stating that the art of Hegedušić, as a synthesis of the pictorial language of the sixteenth century Brueghel, the twentieth century Georg Grosz and local motives, represents an authentic Pannonian style.

Krleža identifies in Hegedušić's drawings “ljepote,” a key-concept of Krleža’s sensory aesthetics in general and Pannonia in particular. “Ljepote” (literally the grammatical plural of “beauty”) are defined in the same essay as imprints of “negativne istine” (lit. “negative truths”). The concept of “ljepote” is then said to be directly related to human fear of mortality. As an example Krleža brings up Fra Angelico. His paintings, Krleža writes, do not strike us because of their “elevated” Christian inspiration (which is ideological and, therefore, ephemeral), but because of “those typical banal characteristics of everyday profoundly earthly excitements” (300). Two aspects are important here: First, the individualism of the moment of both artistic conception and perception. Art depends on sensory perception, not on any
rational or idealistic perception. Secondly, the ambiguous suggestion of transcendence, of art speaking through the ages and resisting history. What speaks through the ages are these “profoundly earthly excitement”--expressions of fear of death and destruction. To Krleža, the work of painters like Brueghel and Bosch, as well as of Georg Grosz, evokes these “negative truths”: images which are both grotesque and an imprint of human mortality and suffering.

According to Krleža, Hegedušić has succeeded in his drawings to bridge “the gap between our Croatian reality and its artistic objectivization in our nineteenth-century literature” (328). His art is a synthesis of “negative truths” and local motives. Frustrated national pride is one of these motives, but Krleža carefully avoids to identify with radical Croat nationalism, like the thought of someone like Ante Starčević (a nationalist, anti-Magyar Croat politician from the second half of the nineteenth century). The latter’s political discourse, his outrage with “the poverty, corruption, grief and drunkenness of the Hungarian yoke” (329), is reflected in the work of Hegedušić. But the geographical range of Hegedušić’s motives is restricted to local culture “in between Karlovac and Koprivnica” (330). Opposing Hungarian nationalist politics, it does not resort to a Croatian nationalist antithesis. Krleža also manages to avoid the socialist alternative by emphasizing the painter’s individual talent as well as the impossibility of basing genuine art on political ideas.

As Pannonia loses its explicit Marxist, communist party-oriented character, its dominant rhetoric remains negative. Krleža’s Pannonia, with its lists of ruins where one expects cathedrals, and the praise of a sarcastic, self-carnivalizing poetry instead of perfect alexandrines, more and more became a locus for his alternative, negative, individual aesthetics. It now mounted up to a full history of discontinuity and destruction at the center of which was concern with the individual’s homelessness. Beside growing political discontent, the evolution of his Pannonia also lays bare Krleža’s sense of individual alienation, his aesthetic discontent as an artist in a marginal cultural space where aesthetic form evolved somehow differently than in Western-Europe. His search for an authentic form leads away not only from official communist party aesthetics and from nineteenth-century nationalism but also from copying Western models.

5. Pannonia as dominant space in Krleža’s fiction

Krleža’s discontent and his disoriented fictional characters, like the author-traveler, traveled almost exclusively by train. The train, and to a less extent the fiaker (traditional horse-drawn carriage), offers a particular perspective on geography and history. The perspective is dynamic: the traveler ardently wishes to leave Pannonia (for the West, for the cultural capital Paris) or comes back, disillusioned by the same cultural capital, like the painter Filip Latinovicz—but once returned, realizes the gap between actual cultural surroundings and the embellished image in his perception. This is a dramatic clash which causes the protagonist great agony, often leading him to contemplate suicide.

In 1926 Krleža published a novella under the title “In the fog”, which six years later re-appeared slightly altered as the novella “Ivan Križovec” in the Glembaj prose cycle. It is of special interest to the evolution of the Pannonian space, because the novella, which contains literal passages from “Letter from Koprivnica”, seems a direct transposition of the author’s impressions into fiction. The novella presents the lawyer Ivan Križovec. He is involved in a problematic amorous affair with Laura Waronig-Glembajeva, also known as the baroness Lenbachova who, as the genealogical tree presented at the beginning of the Glembaj novellas informs us, “attempted her first suicide together with dr. Križovec”.

Križovec, in charge of some complicated financial transactions following the demise of the Habsburg double monarchy and the creation of the kingdom of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs, is a frequent traveler between Budapest, Belgrade, and Zagreb. The novella is situated
on a railway station, in a provincial town in northern-Croatia where Križovec is waiting for his delayed train to continue the journey. The railroad is the notorious MAV, “Magyar Állam Vasutak”, the Hungarian State Railway, which from 1867 until 1918 held the connection Budapest-Rijeka and as such became for Croatian nationalism a symbol of Hungary’s domination. The town is anonymous. In “Letter from Koprinica”, the description started with “When traveling in this province in winter, one always gets the impression that the railroad bores its way into a picture frame of sorts, one of Brueghel’s snowy compositions” (241). In the novella, the description of the town begins as follows: “When traveling in these parts of the Kingdom [of Slovenes, Croats and Serbs], one gets the impression that the railroad bores its way into a picture frame of sorts, one of Brueghel’s snowy compositions” (“Ivan Križovec” in Glembajevi Proza 187). Here, the fictional character Ivan Križovec focalizes Pannonia space. He is certainly not an alter ego of the author, if only because the opaque narrative situation places the observation in between the narrative instance and the character Križovec.

Križovec is one among many post-Habsburg characters in Krleža’s work who realize after the double deluge of the Great War and the end of the Double Monarchy, that their investments in a political career have been in vain. With Krleža’s typical mix of critical distance, political outrage and psychological analysis, the novella’s anonymous narrator presents Križovec as a drifter who neither politically nor culturally feels at home. Uprooted, as one “who better spoke Hungarian than his own mother tongue” (194), he has invested all his life into a Habsburg-Hungarian career, and now sees himself confronted with what he really is:

This typically Croatian mentality of ours, an unreliable peasant-Hochstapler mentality, an imitation of the Hungarian, regionalist, anti-Semitic, Verböczy-gentry mentality, which has settled as Pannonian mud ever since the crescent blew above Buda’s fortress. (191)

Thus occurs Pannonia on the margins of the Glembaj cycle: as a negative memory that records individual disasters and the collective failure of a whole national conception. Here, the dominant space is historical: the biographies and careers of the Glembaj members and other protagonists are intimately related to the historical fate of the Croatian nation in the Habsburg monarchy. The characters’ sense of being homeless stems from the ruptures and sudden changes that have rumpled their lives; Pannonia is a background space, a gloomy, rustic reality which among these kingdoms, empires and civilizations which come and go, is the only stable factor. Their homelessness is first and foremost the result of a crisis of the Croatian nation: historically opaque, a linguistic hybrid and politically compromised, its foundations fail to provide them shelter.

Was Zagreb already in the Glembaj novella referred to as “a dive along the road from Buda to the sea” (192) (to be sure, in the perception of Ivan Križovec), when Filip Latinovicz in the 1932 novel arrives at Zagreb Central Station, the name of the Croatian city is not even mentioned. What is mentioned throughout the novel is the village where the protagonist’s mother lives and which is the true destination of his return from Paris: Kostanjevec, the imaginary village in northern Croatia, already mentioned in the last of the Glembaj novels. Filip Latinovicz, the protagonist of this Künstlerroman is a painter who returns (by train and by fiaker) to his native soil which the anonymous narrative instance identifies as Pannonia. Pannonia is the dominant toponym in the novel, politically, historically and genealogically. Croatia is mentioned only a few times and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia - the political reality at the time and the setting of the Glembaj-cycle - is left out entirely. Filip is not only in search of his genealogy, trying to find out from his mother the identity of his father: as an artist who
spent twenty-five years abroad, in the "Western metropolis," he feels estranged and fosters the illusion of refining his cultural roots in Pannonia. In the village of Kostanjevec, he gets entangled in social relations with two "brodolomci" (castaways) - Krleža’s favorite metaphor for characters who have lost their social position. Set on the margins of the Glembaj-cycle, some of the characters seem to have the tainted blood of this family, like the central female character, the self-destructive Bobočka with whom Filip starts an affair; so does her former, worn-out lover, the bankrupt lawyer Vladimir von Baločanski. The ending is gloomy: Baločanski kills Bobočka in an attack of jealousy. Filip’s mood fluctuates extremely, especially under the spell of dr. Kyriales, a “Caucasian Greek, whose mother came from Smyrna and whose father came from Kiev; a Georgian who had worked as a journalist in Riga and was now roaming through the Pannonian forests” (239, references are to the Croatian edition), a runaway revolutionary who in Filip’s confused perception takes on the shape of the devil. With his materialist expositions he undermines Filip’s ideas and convictions about his painting and about his national identity. But it is, unexpectedly, Kyriales who commits suicide. He jumps in front of a train, his body is found along the Pannonian railway. Initially, Filip has high hopes of regaining his mental peace when he returns to Pannonia:

More and more often it had occurred to Filip lately that he might break away from all the soot and smells and go home to Pannonia, where he had not been for so long. To live down there with his mother in the vineyard at Kostanjevec for one autumn, rich, quiet, and with wine in abundance. [...] Pannonia would be sleeping and there would be no soot, no hurry, no nerves. (45)

But already while waiting for a fiaker at a café, to go from the capital to Kostanjevec, his hopes turn out to be an illusion: “This muddy Pannonian backwater, this wretched Kaptol street [...] This morning he had returned to an old picture he had never mastered, to old worries and cares, the source of the sorrow and depression that beset him, as if he had awakened in his own grave” (50). A dialogue with his coachman, the archetypal Pannonian, only deepens his sense of displacement. The difference between himself, a decadent, “neurasthenic” artist and the coachman is as extreme as the difference between the old rotten coach and the plane London-Bombay above their heads, “Two worlds in three days: London-Bagdad-Bombay, and the inn at Kravoder with the nuns and their basket of eggs! The Pannonian mire and civilization!” (71) The coachman, Joža Podravec, like the lawyer Ivan Kržovec, “has forgotten his Croatian”, in his case because of his long detention as a military prisoner in Russia. His language is the local Kajkavian dialect.

Bobočka, the central female character, has forgotten her Croatian too. Like Ivan Kržovec, she is magyarized, but more important, she is something in between, in the perception of Filip who, under the spell of Kyriales, realizes that “nationality is a petty-bourgeois prejudice” (240):

As for Bobočka, she was a Hungarian, a Pannonian, from Medjumurje, with a mixture of German, Italian and South Styrian aristocratic blood in her veins, so that she could hardly speak Croatian! And Filip, on his father’s side, was no one; the Valenti’s had come to Cracow from Ždala, and his mother was a Hungarian from Szekesfehervar. Lithuanians, Ukrainians, Veronese, Pannonians, Hungarians; what distant parts of the world had they come from? Out of what distant mists had their bodies reached this Danubian mud, to crawl about here in these narrow surroundings, with that blood still flowing in their veins? (240)
It is under this tension that Filip is painting. No wonder that there is an enormous discrepancy between what he feels he should paint and what he actually realizes. When attending the popular feast of Saint Rock, Filip feels separated from the common people and thinks of them as still living in the Middle Ages. It is here, in Filip’s perception, that the pictorial world of Brueghel and Bosch is verbally represented. Shut off from the wild, carnivalesque feast, but touched by what is described as a barbaric, erotic force, Filip conceives of a painting of Christ as martyr and redeemer. He is convinced that this artistic image has the power to reconcile his alienated self with local reality. What is it exactly that “inspires” him?

This clash between the pagan, Pannonian, environment and that pale Man who was hanged like a thief, but who as such has remained a living symbol to this day - the visionary hatred of that higher Man who realizes from his cross, from that fantastic height from which all the hanged look down upon us, that the dirt under our feet can be dominated only by the clash of the granite - this should be put on canvas for once! (180)

The image evoked here is deeply ironical. The messianic figure Filip imagines is precisely what he himself is not: a revolutionary, a prophet, a subject very much capable of acting. The messianic figure recalls the particular subjectivity from the nineteenth century re-awakening of national consciousness, embodied by national poets like the Hungarian Sándor Petöfi, a key figure for the young Krlžeə as Croatian national icons failed to inspire him. It recalls also another type of subjectivity, that of the revolutionary from the early twentieth century Marxist revolution, as embodied in An Excursion to Russia by the figure of Lenin, whose iconic status reminded Krlžeə of a prophet, and even of Jesus. No wonder, then, that Filip does not succeed in materializing his image in a painting. What he does paint, towards the end of the novel, in a mood of almost compete alienation, when he has lost grip on his own life and on the life of the people around him, is the following image:

His mother, old Liepach, fat Karolina, Miško the cowherd, Bobočka, and Baločanski - he painted them all as they sat drinking tea in the full glare of the sun round a samovar in the summerhouse; old Regina with his Excellency, like two ridiculous parrots, fat Karolina in the center of the composition with her swollen stomach and red butcher’s hands; the deaf and dumb Miško, and the imbecile Baločanski: two epileptic, demoniac, grimacing masks; Bobočka pale, in black silk, was pouring tea for him, Filip, into a bright red cup. He painted himself in front of the circle with his palette and a cigarette in his hand, and on the summerhouse, on the green ivy-tod he set an old, secular raven; everything was oily with the heavy strokes of the brush, too wet and too rich in color, lapidary, ponderous: a shade, possibly, too Nordic, the motif a little too problematic, though not the execution: it had been put on canvas in a single sweep, almost modeled in a single stroke. (230)

Why is Filip capable of painting this self-portrait and incapable of painting his vision of Christ? One answer is revealed in the text: the image of Christ is based on an idea, whereas the image of the self is conceived through the senses. As a sublime idea, the Messiah transcends what is human; I suggest that at this point in the novel, as well as in the toponym Pannonia, any human transcendence is carnivalized – including afterlife as an immortal national icon. The second image portrays Filip in the presence of other characters in the novel. At the end of the quoted fragment, Filip expresses his satisfaction about the painting in free indirect speech. But does he have reason to be satisfied? There is an irony hidden in this
scene. The fragment has an anonymous narrator but is focalized by Filip. He thus focalizes his own painting, which portrays himself as a painter in the presence of the other characters in the novel. Some of these other characters are portrayed as caricatures. But who is really the caricature? The people that are portrayed by the painter, or the painter who portrays the people adding an image of himself as a painter? The irony of his self-satisfaction becomes more obvious when one realizes that these people include his mother who has never revealed to him who his real father was; the man who actually turns out to be his real father; his adulterous mistress Bobočka; and the castaway who will finally kill Bobočka. Thus a scene that seems to suggest reconciliation, in fact implies the irrevocability of alienation.

One character is absent from this group portrait: Kyriales. Taking into account the importance of the group portrait, this is a crucial void. This is a self-portrait of the artist among Pannonians. It implies that Kyriales is the sole character whose sense of displacement is not related to the Pannonian complex, and, therefore, not to the crisis of the nation. The Pannonians, these “morbid weaklings and confused decadents in Kostanjevec” (186) see Kyriales as a stranger and an outsider. In Filip’s free indirect speech he becomes “this stranger, this unknown traveler and chance passerby, this fugitive and emigrant” (195). To Kyriales, then, the nation and national identity are illusions. His suggestive reasoning undermines Filip’s sense of national identity:

That unpleasant Greek had been right the other night, in saying that “nationality was a petty-bourgeois prejudice.” On another occasion—against his own innermost convictions—Filip had argued that nationality was a subjective factor, a psychological phenomenon, a notion of metaphysical origin. Just lately, he had been too much under the influence of such vague metaphysics! (240)

And as to the Pannonians’ question who this Kyriales is, the answer reveals a nomadic background, only tied by blood relations:

His mother was supposed to have been a Greek Jewess from an island off Asia Minor; his father, Kiril Pavlovitch, a Russian staff lieutenant in a Guards regiment […] From such a dull, bald, unhealthy, inert family there had suddenly surged up within the young Sergej Kyriales his Levantine Jewish blood. (187)

What is more, this outsider in the Pannonian realm remains also an outsider for the narrative instance. Kyriales gets to speak in direct and indirect speech, but his inner thoughts are rarely exposed. He is thus dominantly focalized from the outside, by the Pannonians. It seems that the narrative instance, although (mostly) impersonal, is situated within the Pannonian constellation, and therefore it too views Kyriales as an outsider. There is one leap into his thoughts, a symptom of the return to a more traditional narrative, away from stream of consciousness, toward the end of the novel. But at least from a thematic point of view, the novel is clear about the fact that Kyriales’s sense of homelessness is different in kind: he never had a home, he only has a nomadic past, whereas the Pannonians, even if they are catching at shadows, are faced with a post-national reality, the reality of the nineteenth-century nation in crisis, and therefore can look back at a (lost) sedentary identity.

So Krleža’s Pannonians are uprooted. But their sense of being homeless is still national: they are in agony because they cannot live up to the utopian standards of the linguistic, genealogical and moral purity of the nineteenth century national ideal. Krleža’s Pannonia thus shows the nation in crisis. It is far from sure whether his Pannonians have an alternative. Can they go beyond the nation and explore some kind of supranational identity? Difficult. The sole possibility to engage in dialogue with other nations seems the shared sense
of crisis. For not just the Croatian nation is in crisis in Pannonia; so is the Hungarian - at least in Krleža's paraphrase of the work of Endre Ady.

6. With Endre Ady into pre-national Pannonian space

Thus Krleža's Pannonia is in more than one respect a response to the nation: it is a critique from the inside, an admonition that the nationalism of the philistines is reductionist, that its cultural memory has left out essential linguistic and historical traditions. It is also self-castigating: it is sobered up by an internationalist critique of nationalism, and yet it has an emotional, highly individual perception of local identity. Its attitude toward the nineteenth-century conception of the nation is one of simultaneous revising and reprimanding. It conceives of the nation as a home, but with a roof that fails to provide shelter.

For Krleža, the toponym Pannonia had as yet no pre-determined meanings: the literary and historical meanings attached to it, were not powerful enough to withstand his negative vision. "Ex Pannonia" (1906), a poem by the Croatian poet Vladimir Vidrič (1875-1909) presents as its lyrical I a Roman, who "When we eight years ago/behind the black Pannonian grove/were building hamlets/plowing the land" faces a mourning barbarian. The poem hangs, as it were, in static, mythical space, without any attempt to link up the classical age with contemporary reality. In Hungarian letters, the toponym Pannonia may have been more in use than in Croatian letters. In 1940, when Krleža was about to abandon Pannonian space, it still proved vital to the Hungarian poet Mihály Babits (1883-1941). To him, writing in 1940, Pannonia is the vital substratum of classical Latin culture that connects his native soil to the Italian and Mediterranean culture:

My homeland is Pannonia; my "second" home—if I may use the old phrase—is Italy. Pannonia is an ancient Roman territory where one can find the traces of Roman culture so far. Workers often came across Roman coins while hoeing in the vineyard of my mother. My hometown is the ancient Alsicsa, the museum there proudly presents the mess of the Roman finds from the neighborhood. (Babits, "Itália és Pannónia", II:707)

The Latin substratum is not absent from Krleža's Pannonia, in fact one of the formative experiences of the fictional character Filip Latinovicz, as a boy, was when a classmate came across a small antique sculpture. However, in Krleža's Pannonia the connection between the classical age and contemporary reality, be it mythical or historical, is lost. Instead, barbarians roam the Pannonian realm and have captured the speaking instance, the "we", who is no longer the heir of Roman ancestors. "We" were waiting, to speak with Kavafy, for the barbarians, now "we" are the barbarians and when we look back we see the ruins of civilization piling up. In 1930 Krleza writes about contemporary "Eastern European" poetry: "All these lyricisms only reflect a certain state, a Danubian, Pannonian, Scythian, Hunnish, Balkan, Slavic state, a sad state decaying before the fortified walls of Europe" (161). Scyths, Huns, Slavs: reference is to the nomadic tribes that from the time of Herodotos have been an antithesis to sedentary civilizations and which, before nineteenth-century nationalism redraw the historical map, represented the conglomerate of peoples and tribes in the Danube basin. The quotation is from the introductory remarks to Krleža's essay on the poetry and person of Endre Ady (1877-1919) "The Hungarian poet Endre Ady". The essay is meant to introduce the Hungarian poet to the Croatian audience. Krleža's knowledge of the Hungarian language stemmed from his formative years in the Habsburg military academy in Pécs/Pečuh; in his prose memoir Djetinjstvo u Agramu (A Childhood in Agram, 1942) he mentions family roots in Kapič/Kanizsa, Hungary. It appears from the essay that the Croatian public is not familiar with recent trends in Hungarian literary life. Krleža's mention of the "poor knowledge of the
Hungarian language in our country" (152), only 12 years after the end of the Habsburg Double Monarchy, reveals a tendency of weakening interest for Hungarian matters that was only to increase in the course of time: Kiš in his 1959 “An Excursion to Paris” complains how he has been looking for a publisher for his Ady translations for years already (531).

It is not surprising that Ady, of all the Hungarian poets of his generation, should attract Křež’s attention. Křež must have known Ady’s work from early on. In 1919 he wrote a short obituary for Ady but he is somewhat ambivalent on Ady’s poetry. In his 1930 essay, a sense of futility and of tragic failure in the poet’s biography counters aesthetic qualifications like “his fresh images”, “the music of his rhyme and assonance”, “his audacious phrases”, “the dazzling, extravagant challenge of his language” (152). What fascinated Křež about Ady seems to be the question how to be “a Westerner, an impressionist, a decadent, a poet who, like a Rimbaud, like a Verlaine, gets carried away by the divine nuances and colors of some Hungarian vowel” (159) in the midst of a literary province. Křež’s answer is short and clear: such a character must be “in contradiction not only with the factual state of the matter, but also with oneself” (159).

Rhetorically, the essay is ingenious: while portraying Ady as a critic of the Hungarian nation, Křež can venture a complete deconstruction of his neighboring nation and its ethnic and racial nationalism without lapsing into Croatian national common places about the Hungarian yoke. He almost presents Ady as a model of the East-Central European poet: if the reader still has doubts of the broader meaning of Ady for the whole “Eastern European” realm, than these are removed by Křež’s survey of contemporary poetry, ranging from the Pole Tuwim to the Serb Crnjanski.

What all these poetries have in common, Křež writes, is a sense of being excluded from European culture. He adds that “Eastern European” poetry is lagging behind the innovations in Western Europe. The diagnosis is well-known: one mirrors one’s own poetry to that of Western-Europe. Křež goes a step further, however, by raising the problem to a regional, supranational level. He thus manages to refrain from discriminating, which occurs so often when a national culture is defined as European, excluding by the same token the neighbors from the European realm. Křež, well aware of this mechanism of exclusion, addresses the otherness, or, in his words, the cultures on the border of Europe. In the case of Ady, he does so from his position within Pannonian space. He situates his imaginary meeting with Ady, this poet characterized by “the primeval nihilism of Asiatic tribes” (161) on common ground: in Ady’s mythical Hunya, a space which for Křež flows seamlessly into Pannonian space:

There is this one concept in Ady’s poetry, more a specter than a concept, a ghost-like symbol: Hunya. Hunya is Hungary, the Szent István amalgam of Danubian senselessness […] Hunya is the black veil which covers all of Ady’s poetry. The funeral mourning textile of this notion of Hunya conceals in his poems a Danubian chaos where Huns and Tatars, Mongols and Avars are butchering the Danubian Slavs already for ages, and vice versa. (157-58)

Whilst further elaborating the notion of Hunya, Křež deepens his deconstruction of Hungarian nationalism. He claims a sense of national crisis in Ady’s work:

Descendants from medieval Gypsy and Persian adventurers and travelers, who today carry the coat of arms of a duke, Polish and Dutch Jews, newcomers who arrived on foot two decades ago and who now produce the literary and journalistic output of Hungary, Schwäbische and Rheinländische colonists, in the backwardness of their medieval dialect and their limited Landsknecht-world view as non-commissioned
officers in feudal Habsburg barracks, all this is hopeless, as hopeless as the political hatred of Graničari (Frontiermen), Bunjevci (ethnic Croats), Croats, Serbs, Vlachs and Tzintzars against everything Hungarian. [...] to face in this mass of questions and problems one’s own individual, lyrical, personal weakness, means facing Ady’s Hunya. (158)

One cannot fail to see the parallel with the problematic Croatian national identity of the “Pannonians” in Krleža’s own The Return of Filip Latinovicz. Ady’s diagnosis, according to Krleža, is a national culture in a chaos that stems, it seems, mainly from its extreme ethnic diversity. The diversity is a threat to the nation’s political unity. As Krleža sees it, Ady’s final move, morally outraged when the first world war broke out and “the Paprika Jancsi’s listened to each nod by telephone from Vienna” (170) was “to watch his Hunya from the unbelievably remote abstraction of intellectual emigration” (170). Like in Krleža’s Pannonia, the metaphor of the home for the nation is still there, but it is, as Krleža quotes Ady’s words, “an old and damned home, a terrible home, haunted, sadly romantic” (168).

Krleža himself, caught between two opposing nationalisms, did not find a way out either. But unlike Ady, he lived to see the treaty of Trianon which deprived Hungary of the majority of its territory. And he also had the chance to see for himself the three Yugoslav states. The first two he observed and criticized from within Pannonia; by the time the third, Tito’s Yugoslavia, was established, Krleža had abandoned Pannonia and claimed a key position in Tito’s cultural politics.

The last instance of Pannonia, before the toponym definitively disappears from Krleža’s literary map, is in 1942. While his diaries of these years lament the fate of Croatian soldiers marching off under Hungarian banners toward the Soviet Union, he writes a short essay, called “a fragment”, on the humanist and Latinist poet Jan Panonije, Janus Pannonius. The fragment completely ignores the contemporary political situation, leaving out troubled Croatian-Hungarian relations. Instead, Krleža elaborates a materialistic and sensory aesthetics that he considers the essence of Iannus’s “inspiration.” In his exposition, there are strong echo’s, then, of the aesthetic program Krleža formulated in his essay on the painter Krsto Hegedušić and his authentic Pannonian style. He situates Janus Pannonius in what is essentially pre-national space. Although he applies the possessive “our” (nas) throughout the essay: “our poet” (167), “our people at the court of the Hungarian king Matthias Corvinus.” (170), Krleža uses the figure of Iannus to deconstruct the Croatian literary identity as defined by the Illyrian movement. He speaks in the first person plural and thus seems to define a cultural community to which Janus belongs, but this kinship is put consistently in negative terms, never affirmatively. Instead, Krleža interprets the Latin poetry of Iannus as Europe’s other, as “Scythian, Asian” (168). And his sketch of Janus’ position of a poet in off-center cultural space is strikingly similar to his view of Ady’s position:

Of course, in this area of continuous explosive dangers, where one lives according to the principle of who eats who and big fish devour small fish and vice versa [...], poetry cannot be but a bitter and solipsistic elegy, defiant and sublime towards the question of Europe, permeated with a barbarous, higher irony, sarcasm in fact, which is the main characteristic of folk poetry, of folk sayings and of folk stories, a Pre-Slavic leitmotiv which, as a source of moral and artistic inspiration, has been lasting already for centuries. (174)

Only two years earlier, Mihály Babits had listed Janus among heirs of the Latin spirit, ranging from Marcus Aurelius to Mihály Vörösmarty whose “spirit is Latin [...] and whose music and colors at times recall Vergilius, at times Dante” (II:708). Babits’ basic paradigm is that of a
world literature that claims the perspective of the civilized and observes the nomads, the barbarians standing outside the gates. Krleža on the other hand situates Janus in his pre-national, Pannonian, pandemonium of “bitter, solipsist” artists - outside the gates.

Thus Krleža staged his encounter with Ady in Pannonia. Their common ground seems a very thin varnish, though: Krleža discussed only Ady’s critique of Hungarian national identity. His Ady-essay is also a self-portrait, as it were: it could very well be read as Krleža’s own problematic relation toward Croatian national identity. But that doesn’t turn his Pannonia into a supranational space, merely into a zone of troubled nations that are, moreover, constantly in conflict with each other.

7. Krleža and Kosztolányi clash in Pannonia: my nation, your nation or no nation?

While writing on Janus, Krleža in his World War II diaries also writes about what he sees as Horthy’s Hungarian nationalism. His critique draws essentially on his earlier writings on Hungarian culture, notably the Ady-essay. For him, Horthy’s regime is basically identical to the old ghost of compulsory magyarization. Twenty years after the Trianon treaty detached the majority of Hungarian territory, Krleža’s critique of Horthy’s politics thus echoes the Croatian national pathos with the Austro-Hungarian railroad Budapest-Rijeka. Krleža’s rhetorics have remained unchanged: in one and the same breath he laments the manifestations of Croatian extreme nationalism:

Together with Hungarian Angels, Croatian pilots have left for the Don, the Croatian Fliegereinsatz No 7, whereas my domobrans (honvéds), this time under their own Stockeraus-banner, no longer are HID 42 (Königliche Ungarische Honvéd Infanteriedivision 42) but Wiking SS No X. [...] Who has the courage to diagnose the disease of these idiotic Danubian nations? To what sort of temptation belongs this type of mythomania? (260)

The reference to the political situation in Zagreb is unusually direct for Krleža. In his diaries, he most of the time merely alludes to the complicated situation he found himself in. During the war, he ignored summons from the Croatian Ustaša, the nazi puppet government under Ante Pavelić, to join public life. He was arrested twice, the first time by the Gestapo in 1941. His books were banned and he went into hiding several times. Apparently, the conflict on the left had stirred up feelings to such a degree that joining Tito’s partisans seemed no option. In a letter to Stanko Lasić, Krleža sketched his wartime dilemma as being caught between two fires, “In between Dido (Kvaternik) [minister in the Ustaša administration] and Dido [Milovan Đilas] I’d prefer Dido to liquidate me” (226).

Part of Krleža’s political reflections on Danubian nationalism is his acquaintance with Dezső Kosztolányi. Just before he discusses the Hungarian right wing press, he describes his encounter with the Hungarian writer:

I never wrote down my impressions of a journey to Pest (1915). Green lamps in the editorial office of Világ. Kosztolányi, many years later in Ljubljana. Complains about the pitiful state of Hungarian culture. “Nobody reads anything, nobody takes any interest in anything at all, except in operettas and vulgar comedies. Nothing! If we wouldn’t have Pest’s bel esprits (mostly of Israelite conviction), we wouldn’t have anything at al. The Hungarian Jews are the only guarantee for the survival of Hungarian literature. Who created the cult of Ady? Who reads Babits? Two or three prostitutes, that is what constitutes the Hungarian reading audience.”
Thus spoke Kosztolányi in the year 1915, and one year later, on my way back from Galicia, a conversation in the poet’s flat in Buda, during which I told him how a war was being waged against our own citizens, the Ruthenians, as if they had committed high treason, turned into an agitated dialogue. To my ad hoc commentary about Galicia’s avenue of gallows, Kosztolányi responded agitatedly: “Ha valakinek ebben a háborúban győzni kell, akkor inkább győzzön a saját hazám!” [If anyone should win this war, then it better be my own country!] He formulated this rudely. I responded in an equally rash manner that “not only he had a fatherland, but all of us, second rate Hungarian citizens, yet that I could never become engaged in a national cause if it was not just.” He asked me what I meant by that. I tried to explain, but agitated he interrupted me, advising me not to enunciate my ideas too loudly. At our feet crawled his son Adam. (258-59)

This is the first time Krleža wrote about his acquaintance with Kosztolányi. Kosztolányi is at first sight invisible in Krleža’s œuvre. However, how important he was to Krleža’s perception of Hungarian letters shows Krleža’s Ady-essay, which probably echoes Kosztolányi when saying that the Hungarian nation is, among others, made up of “Polish and Dutch Jews, newcomers who arrived on foot two decades ago and who now produce the literary and journalistic output of Hungary” (158). To the question “who is courageous enough to diagnose the disease of these silly Danubian nations?” Krleža gave the answer himself in a fictionalized version of his encounter with Kosztolányi. In 1962 part three of his novel Banquet u Blitvi (Banquet in Blitva) was published. Part one and two had appeared in 1938. Part three contains a whole chapter which describes the acquaintance of the novel’s protagonist, the publicist and politician Niels Nielsen, with Oktavian Kronberg, a poet modeled after Kosztolányi. The chapter “The Savoy Hotel” contains literal quotations from the 1942 diary. Kronberg even has a son called Adam, who “crawls at his father’s feet.”

Krleža’s and Kosztolányi’s encounters, both the historical ones and their fictional transpositions, can serve as the basis for reconstructing a dialogue between two writers who attempted to come to terms with the writer or poet’s position in a thoroughly politicized society, a position that Krleža, in his encounter with Ady in the Pannonian realm, described as “being in contradiction not only with the factual state of the matter, but also with oneself” (159).

This dialogue is not only important from a historical and thematic point of view. From a formal and generic point of view too, the dialogue is a fascinating event. Krleža fictionalizes in the manner of a roman à clef: proper names are transparent veils covering actual persons. Had the Croatian public not been so ignorant about Hungarian literary life, readers would have easily identified the person behind the literary character. Kosztolányi’s reply can be reconstructed on the basis of two of his novels that bring up the theme of literature and politics. The first is the Nero novel The Bloody Poet, where the relation Nero-Seneca and the latter’s involvement in imperial politics addresses at length the perils of writers and political engagement. However, since the story is set in the Roman empire, the setting is stripped of the specific Danubian-nationalist, post-Trianon context. Much sharper, and more ironical, is Kosztolányi’s strategy in Anna Édes (1926), a novel set in the years immediately following the war and the communist revolution. It opens with Béla Kun’s flight from Budapest, and closes with the appearance of Kosztolányi as a character in the novel.

Krleža’s Banquet in Blitva is an impressively ambitious blow-up of his Pannonian constellation. Whereas his Pannonia was a fusion of actual and imaginary space, Blitva is entirely imaginary. It has elements of dystopia, but it differs profoundly from pure dystopias such as Zamyatin’s We or, for that matter, Orwell’s 1984. It is set in the immediate past of the 1920s. Its dystopian vision is essentially national, in the sense that it reverses the nineteenth-
century national utopia: it presents it as a bloody reality. The toponyms are transparent enough to enable the reader to look for parallels with contemporary East-Central European reality. The imaginary state Blitva is situated on the “Karabaltic”, the “black Baltic”, “kara” being Turkish for “black”. The Baltic is of course Europe upside down: a reversal which Krlèža grounds in the similarities between the Baltic countries and his Pannonian, Croatian-Hungarian realm: Blitva, literally a Mediterranean vegetable, has the Latvian currency “lat” enclosed in its name whereas Blatva, Blitva’s rivaling neighbor state, contains “blato”, the mud or swamp that often occurs as a pars pro toto for the Pannonian realm. The inversion of the Balkans and the Baltics is anticipated in Krlèža’s travelogue An Excursion to Russia, where he failed to see major differences between the sorrow situation of the new state Latvia and his own Croatia.

Also relevant for the geography of the novel is the mention of existing cities (Paris, Taormina). The names of Western European states are again invented. This suggests that names of places and states are invented only where the novel’s action is really concerned with the unstable patchwork of nation states on the former territory of the Habsburg empire. Furthermore, and this brings us to the Kronberg/Kosztolányi figure in the novel, the East-Central Europe in which Blitva is situated, is not only an extension of Pannonia; it is nominally grounded in Krlèža’s paraphrase of Endre Ady’s geography: in “Hunya”. Blitva, independent since the end of World War I, suffered for centuries under the “Hunyan” yoke; until 1918, Hunya formed a monarchy with “Aragon.” The parallel with Croatia’s position within the Austro-Hungarian monarchy is obvious.

Niels Nielsen is a Blitvian publicist and oppositional politician who has fled from his country to neighboring Blatva. There they hail him as a hero. The Blitvian national poet, “author of the ‘Blatvian dythirambes’”, Oktavian Deziderije Kronberg invites him to pay him his respects. The narrator, focalizing Niels Nielsen, introduces the career of Kronberg, this “pale imitation of Verhaeren.” Kronberg is said to be a Blatvian, born in one of the northern provinces of Blitva, (as Niels Nielsen turns out to be a Blitvian born from a Blatvian mother, echoing Krlèža’s satire of Croatian and Hungarian national-ethnic purity) who studied in Hunya and initially made his literary career in the Hunyan language. In the capacity of Hunya’s national poet, who has just published his “nationalist Hunyan Accords”, he meets Niels Nielsen for the first time, “in the early spring of 1913” (III:16). On this occasion, Nielsen reproaches Kronberg for sympathizing with the Hungians while the Hungians oppress the Blatvians, Kronberg’s own people. Kronberg responds by saying that “national feelings are outmoded […] the fundamental task of the poet is to reconcile, not to separate the nations” (III:16).

They meet again in 1916, in the midst of the war. Niels Nielsen is on his way home from the front where (from Nielsen’s perspective) “every day thousands of Hunyan, Blitvian and Blatvian soldiers are dying for the greater glory of Aragon” (III:17). Kronberg is now the quintessential Hunyan bard, about to be accepted as a member of the Academy. Nielsen is outraged about the Hunyan language policy which suppresses the use of the Blitvian vernacular, as a result of which Blitvian soldiers end up at the gallows for insubordination. Again, the parallel historical reality is the position of Croatian domobrani (Hungarian “honvéd”, German “Heimwehr”) in Habsburg service. From now on, the meeting reflects the historical meeting as recorded by Krlèža in his diary. Kronberg first takes an a-political stance, although the narrator mentions Kronberg’s reserves about “some clever fellow citizens of the Israelite conviction” (III:19). When Nielsen criticizes Hunyan nationalism and claims the right to (linguistic) independence for small nations like Blitva and Blatva, Kronberg responds:
We are at war, my dear doctor, unfortunately, as simple as that, and none of us is personally to blame, to be held responsible, we are at war and we wage war to our best ability, a vulgar and inhuman war, sure, often perhaps a stupid war too, and cruel, yes, unjust, perhaps even criminal as you say, “criminal”, okay, I admit to that, but when it comes to for whom the bell tolls, then I rather have it that the bell tolls for our enemies who wish us evil and who plot against our lives... “Right or wrong, my country”.

(III:22)

The appearance of Kronberg’s little son Adam interrupts the discussion. Krleža uses the figure of the son, Adam, to expose in full Kronberg’s alleged hypocrisy “ten years later”, in the contemporary reality of the novel, the second half of the 1920s. For Kronberg is now no longer a Hunyan but a Blatvian poet. And it is Kronberg who claims to have been right ten years before, about the perils of nationalism. Then his son Adam, now “in the fifth grade of the gymnasium”, tells his father that “I did not know you were in favor of the Aragon dynasty, father [...] our schoolbooks claim that you were among the first champions who freed Blatva from the Aragon yoke” (III:26). Upon which Kronberg: “These are all complicated and difficult matters, part of ancient history by now, you do not have the preconditions to understand what I mean, right?” (III:26).

The similarities between the historical Kosztolányi and the fictional Kronberg in Krleža’s rendering are obvious. The difference is not unimportant either. Kosztolányi is Hungarian and wrote only in Hungarian - in the distorted terms of the Blitva novel a full “Hunyan”, whereas Kronberg is a Blatvian, a representative of one of the small and oppressed nations. His hypocrisy in his son’s novel is that he denies his past on the side of the historical oppressor Hunya. Thus Krleža complicates Kosztolányi’s more or less direct national Hungarian stance from their meeting in World War I by giving his fictional equivalent an ethnically mixed background. Kronberg, more than Kosztolányi, is “in contradiction with himself.” What is more, Krleža has made him the mirror image of Niels Nielsen: whereas both are from a mixed Blitvo-Blatvian background, their responses to ethnic impurity are the opposite of one another.

Krleža’s allegation of hypocrisy dates from the late 1950s, when he wrote the third part of Banquet in Blitva, which contains the chapter about Kronberg. Kosztolányi’s novelistic response therefore antedates Krleža’s allegation. But it is so apt that it is tempting to think Kosztolányi wrote it with his discussion with Krleža in mind. More probable of course is that what Krleža wrote in the late 1950s related to Kosztolányi’s intention as a writer to stay away from politics and to be a homo aestheticus as opposed to a homo moralis. The distinction is from Kosztolányi himself and brought up by Péter Esterházy in his introduction to the recent English translation of Kosztolányi’s novel Skylark; in our context, it could very well serve to qualify the different stance of the two authors with respect to political reality. As we have seen, Krleža, in his novel, speculates about Kronberg’s motives. From Kosztolányi’s remarks to him, he builds the character Kronberg and then judges this character on moral grounds, through the prism of Niels Nielsen’s moralism.

In the last chapter of Kosztolányi’s novel Édes Anna (Anna Édes, 1926, quotations are my translation on the basis of the German edition), the story of a housemaid who murders her patrons, situated right after the end of Béla Kun’s republic, three men, among them Szilard Druma, a lawyer involved in Anna’s process, stroll by Kosztolányi’s house. This is what they see – and how they watch:

Secretly curious and sincerely angry they observed the garden and thought what everybody thinks when watching a house from the outside: happiness and peace live here.
A blond boy in sailor suit sat at the table. (256)

The master of the house appears, he spots the passers-by and their glances meet. The passers-by continue on their way. The following conversation unfolds:

“That’s Kosztolányi,” Druma said after a while, “Dezső Kosztolányi.”
“The journalist?”
“Yes.”
“He wrote a poem once,” stated the other electoral activist, “some poem of sorts, at least. About the death of a sick child or about an orphan, I am not sure. My daughter told me about it recently.”
Druma said loftily: “He was a big communist.”
“He?” the first electoral activist was surprised. “But now he is a big clericalist.”
“Yes,” the other electoral activist confirmed. “I read in a Viennese newspaper that he is a White terrorist.”
“He used to be a great Bolshevik,” Druma insisted.
[…]
“I don’t understand. What does he want? For whom is he?”
“Simple,” Druma concluded. “For everyone and for no-one. He swims with the tide. Earlier the Jews paid him, he used to be for them back then, nowadays the Christians pay him. He is a smart man,” he said winking at the others, “he knows what he is doing.”
The three friends agreed on this. (257)

The novel closes with the author’s white dog Swan, who watches over the house’s peace and whose barking drowns out the voices of the passers-by. In the novel, the figure of Kosztolányi is not the sole subject for dispute. There is the main character, the maid Anna, about whom everyone has an opinion but who herself hardly gets to speak. And there is Béla Kun, whose flight from Budapest in an airplane “his pockets stuffed with Gerbeaud cakes, with adornments and jewelry stolen from countesses and baronesses and other good-hearted, mild ladies, with altarpieces and similar precious objects” – “Thus at least was the story in the city” (7).

The difference between Krleža and Kosztolányi is not just homo moralis vs. homo aestheticus. It is also a distinction between a person as defined by his public statements, by his life in private family sphere and even as defined by his own thoughts, his self-image. Krleža points at the necessity to make political choices and to engage oneself for social causes, even, or, precisely when one is a writer. Hence Niels Nielsen fails to distinguish between Kronberg’s public life and his role as a father who justifies his conduct to his son: for him, Kronberg is a hypocrite in both cases. The novelist Kosztolányi does, however, distinguish public and private life. He complicates the matter by pointing at the instability of the political moment, the discrepancy between thought and action and, for that matter, between word and thought, literature and life. One cannot on the other hand simplify Krleža’s call for political engagement. Nielsen is no one-dimensional hero. He has to pay a very high prize for his engagement: when he finally becomes president of Blitva, he is said to have a lot of blood on his hands.

This difference is also relevant with respect to narrative form. As a rule, fiction can provide insight into a character’s consciousness. Kosztolányi, by refraining from reading the mind of his central character Anna, thematizes the impossibility to penetrate another person’s mind. The public speculates and the prosecutor tries in vain to establish a motive; meanwhile the narrator refrains from reading Anna’s mind. Her silence is a silence even within a private
atmosphere: consider the chapter “A Wild Night” where the son of her patrons, Jani, seduces her and where her experience of the event is left out entirely. Kosztolányi the character, referred to as “the journalist”, is scorned for his alleged hypocrisy to which the novel responds by pointing at an essential distinction between the writer as a public and a private figure. The first one can condemn for his political stances, about the second one can only speculate: things are certainly more complicated than the simple minded Druma suggests. In this respect, Kosztolányi’s Anna Édes can be said to explore novelistic form as a means to lay bare the ambiguities between the inner life of the characters and private social life, and between private and public life. The fact that the author presents himself viewed by passers-by, one of whom is a character in the novel, creates a paradox: on the one hand, there is the suggestion that the author’s private life is relevant to public life and to the recent historical reality in which he situates his story of the housemaid Anna. But insight into his private life is limited to a mere glance. We learn nothing about the author Kosztolányi’s political opinions, nor about his past.

Kreleža’s Blitva not only transposes the historical encounter between the two writers; it takes sides and accuses by means of a rather one-sided focalization, almost exclusively through Niels Nielsen. The only other figure whose thoughts are widely displayed through an inner monologue is Nielsen’s adversary, colonel Barutanski, dictator of Blitva. As a follow up to Pannonia, the imaginary realm of Banquet in Blitva does not resolve the political status quo of Eastern European space where opposing nationalisms confront one another. One could even argue that Nielsen’s fate – he becomes the head of state of Blitva after a double revolution – accepts the political status quo of nations states in which one takes sides on the basis of one’s own national background, however complicated or mixed it may be. And there is another reductive element in Kreleža’s fictionalizing of Kosztolányi. Kronberg is identified as a l’art pour l’art; Kreleža’s narrator exposes his a-political, internationalist stance as enabled by his position as poet of a dominating nation state. The underlying critique is that Kronberg’s literary output merely confirms his political hypocrisy: in a thoroughly politicized society, Nielsen suggests, publishing l’art pour l’art poetry is a thoroughly political act. Anna Édes, and also Kosztolányi’s first novel, The Bloody Poet, about Nero and Seneca, deny this: they are indeed thoroughly political works, they only treat political issues differently from Kreleža’s fiction. In my opinion, they successfully establish what Kreleža certainly denies the figure of Kronberg: a fictional realm where neither the narrator’s nor the character’s utterances can be read as authorial statements.

Let me illustrate this notion of an independent fictional realm with a third novel by Kosztolányi, which takes us back into Pannonia, Skylark (1924). Although the novel is solely engaged with family life in a provincial town, the atmosphere is thoroughly political. The story of an older couple whose unmarried daughter leaves town for a week, during which the parents realize how much their life has changed under the influence of their shame of their daughter’s ugliness, is set in an imaginary provincial town, Sárszeg (“muddy corner”), modeled after Szabatka/Subotica. It is a dying place, presented from the viewpoint of an older couple. Set in 1899, three years after the millenial celebrations of the Hungarian nation) the narrator’s stance is dispassionate. There is absolutely no nostalgia, no post-Trianon weeping for lost Hungarian ground. This is a quiet, moribund world where national colors are fading and where citizens take a stroll to watch the coffins in the undertaker’s shop windows. So, once more this is a realm where politics permit communal life, but only backstage. The dispassionate narrator is at a distance.

The Kreleža-Kosztolányi dialogue thus started off as a passionate argument about how a writer should respond to the rivaling nationalisms of Pannonia, and, from Kreleža’s perspective, about the perils of Kosztolányi’s a-political position. Pannonia in the work of Kreleža is no longer the predominant toponym after World War II. Before the war, Kreleža had
always been on the margins of political life: first as a Croat in the Habsburg army, afterwards as a socialist in the first Yugoslavia, then, during the 1930s, as a dissident in the Yugoslav communist party. This changed after Tito seized power in 1945, and especially in 1952, when Krleža gave his famous lecture at a writers’ congress in Ljubljana, which is commonly regarded as the beginning of the relatively relaxed cultural climate in Tito’s communist Yugoslavia. The use of the toponym Pannonia seems related to Krleža’s marginal position: it disappeared when he became a widely accepted writer in Tito’s Yugoslavia. The unexpected ending of the third part of Banquet in Blitva, when Niels Nielsen accepts the offer to become the head of state of Blitva, has thus its equivalent in Krleža’s career as a politically engaged writer. History can be ironical: by the time Krleža published the third and final part of Banquet in Blitva, in January and February 1962, he accompanied Tito on a visit to Egypt, for the movement of non-allied countries. To confront the morally outraged Niels Nielsen, a character situated in the interwar period, with the author of the 1960s, could have been a metafictional trick not unlike the appearance of the author in Kosztolánya’s Anna Édes.

This would not do justice, however, to the complexities of Krleža’s Banquet in Blitva. Whereas almost all characters, including Kronberg and Nielsen, ground their identity in their sense of nationality, whether they affirm or question it, there is one character in the novel who serves as a spokesman of those excluded from the national communities, the Jews. Egon Blithauer, born Egon Samujlović Blitwitz, is a “socialist” and “internationalist” who attacks Nielsen for his naïve belief in national identity and thus echoes Kyriales’ critique of Filip Latinovicz’s national identity. Their long dialogue is rendered in direct speech with no interference of the narrator. The reader moves back and forth between Nielsen’s words and Blithauer’s replies. When Nielsen says that the fate of his nation makes him feel ashamed, Blithauer replies: “No, my dear doctor, there is a huge gap between me and you. You feel ashamed in theory, whereas I, I feel the shame on my skin, like itch or like bugs!” (III-142)

And he then tells about his whereabouts, how he was always, whether in Blitva or in Blatva or in Hunya, sooner or later, in spite of his attempts to assimilate, identified as “Egon Samujlović” […] “stigmatized as a Gypsy” (III-142). We do not get Blithauer’s inner thoughts: after their dialogue, focalization again shifts to Niels Nielsen. The plot’s subsequent progress is crucial: Nielsen – unintentionally – leads the Blatvian secret police to Blithauer. The latter, socialist and revolutionary, is killed leaving Nielsen once again with more blood on his hands. Banquet in Blitva thus diagnoses national homelessness by distinguishing it from that other sense of homelessness, that of the Jews in the Danube-basin, who are made to feel outsiders within every nation. By sticking to Nielsen’s perspective, Krleža refrains from expressing their experience.

Feeling ashamed “in theory” or feeling the shame “on your skin”: thus Blithauer formulates the difference in experience between the national intellectual Nielsen and himself, the “international”. Krleža’s Pannonia was, essentially, a space of national homelessness. The experience of those whom the nation excluded, appears on the margins of his Pannonia.

8. Kiš’s Pannonia: inventory

When in the second half of the 1950s Kiš started his search for a narrative form for his family history, he worked, as it were, in a vacuum. Works of those who, like his father, had led lives of wandering in the Danube basin, excluded from the national realm, were either non-existent or inaccessible to Kiš, as the dominant language of the supranational Central European interwar world had been German. Eduard Sam, the self-appointed prophet and incarnation of Ahasveros, the Wandering Jew, is in the work of Danilo Kiš the first of a number of wandering characters who, as apatrides, “men without fatherland”, suffer from an a-national
homelessness. They are all Jews. It is not religion that inspires their sense of Jewishness, nor any other alleged subjective feeling that comes from within. Their Jewishness stems from a sense of menace. This is what haunts Eduard Sam.

Probably the only two models available to Kiš were Kafka and, especially, Bruno Schulz’s *Street of Cinnamon Shops* (1933), a Serbian translation of which was published in Belgrade in 1961. Kiš’s personal library, the contents of which are available on the internet (www.kis.org.yu), holds a copy of it. I am not sure whether Kiš had actually read Schulz before or during he wrote his trilogy. But the similarities are so strong that it is hard to imagine they are purely accidental. To list a few: time is measured by days of the weeks and seasons, no years and no geographical location; a world created out of books, rather than books created in the world; abundant use of metaphor; family life dominated by women among whom the adult first person narrators situates his former self; a father who remains at a distance and who is probably suffering great psychic stress, amounting to some sort of “anxiety neurosis” as Kiš called it, an “endemic disease of interwar Central European Jewish intelligentsia” (“Life, literature” 29); the father who initially succeeds in enchanting his son, putting himself at the heart of the boy’s universe only to gradually disappear. In general, Kiš must have felt literary kinship between the Hungarian-Yugoslav province and Schulz’s Galicia, much like Krleža could take the Baltics as analogy of the Danube basin.

By the time Kiš started contemplating how to write down the whereabouts of his father, he really had no access to homeless figures in literature; Schulz seems to have been the exception. The travelogue “An Excursion to Paris” makes no mention of other literary discoveries except for the French *nouveau roman*. For instance Ödön von Horváth, who later became an icon of Central European homelessness to Kiš, fictionalized in the character Egon von Nemeth, was unavailable to him at the time:

**FIUME, BELGRAD, BUDAPEST, PRESSBURG, WIEN, MÜNCHEN**


The first translations of Horváth’s prose into Serbo-Croat appeared in the nineteen nineties in Split, Croatia. The choice of the independent publishing house Feral Tribune, which began its publishing activities with short prose from Kiš’s legacy, was considered almost as an act of dissidence; later, the first line from the Horváth quotation became a slogan for the Belgrade independent publisher B92. A similar case is the recently re-discovered Rumanian author Mihailu Sebastianu, whose diaries from the years 1935-1944 show the increasing isolation of a Jewish intellectual and writer in Bucharest. Faced with growing nationalism he resorted to “Danubian Jew” as a designation of his supranational identity.

Kiš created Eduard Sam without these models, which came to his attention only later. What he did have was the double linguistic tradition of Serbocroat and Hungarian, which presented him with (at least) three national traditions and with a number of authors from these traditions who, all in their own way, sought for supranational models: for the young Babits English literature served as a model, and also a younger poet like György Petri. And there is also Kosztolányi (to whom Kiš referred as “one of his great examples” at the end of his life)
whom Kiš could read next to and in comparison with Krleža. Especially Krleža’s work must have guided him in the lost world of the double monarchy; there were, of course, many translations available to him from the German (Otto Weininger’s Geschlecht und Karakter for instance); Krleža’s erudition compensated for the rest. And even when it came to Hungarian literature, Kiš sometimes followed Krleža’s opinions. Thus in “An Excursion to Paris”, when he presents Ady, he simultaneously quotes from Krleža’s essay about him. So Kiš had access to more than one national tradition, but none of these furnished examples of the historical figure that occupied a central place in his narrative work: the homeless. Moreover, his father had disappeared in Auschwitz and so a final and fatal event had to be added to a family history of wandering. What finally became Kiš’s Pannonia thus differed from Krleža’s in two fundamental respects. First, Kiš’s family perspective was marked by the fate of the father, a victim of anti-Semitism. Writing in the former Yugoslavia about the commonality of the experience of Jewish victims was a hazardous affair. Collective suffering of all was one of the pillars of the Titoist myth about World War II. This applied to the holocaust too: next to equating all victims, the enemy was also reduced to one single abstract notion: fascism.

Krleža never wrote about the Jewish holocaust as a historical event separate from collective suffering in World War II: in that respect, he conformed himself to the Titoist version of history. Krleža’s difficulties with the dogmatic communists had continued after WWII when Milovan Đilas banned some of his plays from the Belgrade National Theatre. But Krleža’s 1952 Ljubljana speech confirmed Marxism as the founding ideology of Tito’s Yugoslavia. His 1945 essay “Književnost Danas” (Literature Today) (which Đilas initially seized) discusses the “indescribability of everything we have gone through” (76), but leaves the identity of the victims in the anonymous first person plural. To his own question “how everything that we have gone through should be expressed in literature” the essay suggests that Shakespeare is “still the predominant literary formula for our bloody contemporary era” (75). But whereas his official essayist and pamphletist output confirmed the Titoist myth simply by not denying it, many still remembered his role in the conflict on the left in the 1930s, when he had demanded that Tito should distance himself and the Yugoslav communist party from Stalin’s purges.

Thus was Krleža’s public and political position in the second half of the 1950s. In view of these differences one should ask why Kiš chose Pannonia as the dominant toponym of his family trilogy. Two answers seem probable. First, because as we have seen, Krleža’s work presents a number of uprooted fictional characters (Blithauer, Kyriales) and although these are, in a manner of speaking, negative portraits, their experience of homelessness may have served as a model for Kiš’s family history, even if Kiš corrected or altered it. To my knowledge, Krleža’s work was the first major attempt in the basically national Yugoslav literatures to consider the historical fate of fellow citizens who were excluded from these national traditions. Secondly, Krleža’s Pannonia offers an image of history that, although deeply rooted in a national identity, builds its cultural memory on the basis of negative continuity, of destructiveness, ruins. Part of this is Krleža’s tireless insisting on the reductionism of nineteenth-century nationalism, as well as his depiction of the painful and problematic encounter of the Hungarian and Croatian nation in the Pannonian realm.

Finally, beside the toponym, there is a strong resemblance of physical space, realized through metaphors and imagery. Kiš takes from Krleža the Pannonian sea and the omnipresence of water which transforms every vehicle on wheels into a boat or a ship, and eventually into a lugubre gondola, an image of death. In Hourglass, Eduard Sam expresses his fear that “the people of his generation (those who would survive) would be considered in the new world as fossils of a distant, antediluvian era” (96). From The Return of Filip Latinovicz there is the “velvet album” with old family photographs which in Kiš’s Early Sorrows serves as the title of the closing chapter. A comparison of Krleža’s and Kiš’s
Pannonian train shows the overlap and the difference. The factual I in Krleža’s travelogues and the actual father Eduard Kiš, as well as the fictional Filip Latinovicz and the (meta)fictional Eduard Sam, alias E.S., author of the historical “Timetable of Buses, Ships, Trains and Aeroplanes,” all traveled by train, somewhere and sometime in the 1930s in Pannonia. So the Pannonia of Kiš and Krleža is geographically identical: both spaces cover, approximately, the Danube, Sava and Drava plain. History, however, makes the difference between Kiš’s and Krleža’s Pannonia. Krleža’s Pannonia is preoccupied with contemporary reality, it is a constructed space, whereas Kiš’s Pannonia, preoccupied with historical space, is retrospective, and therefore reconstructed. E.S.’s train is, historically speaking, a different one from Krleža’s. The latter, as we saw, is afloat amidst contemporary reality, whereas Kiš’s is historically fixed: its final destination is Auschwitz, 1944. The retrospective gaze of the son watching the father points the train into one single direction and it transforms E.S.’s world into a closed universe, from which there is no escape.

Images of time (clepsydra and hourglass) are, like trains, indicative of the differences between Krleža’s and Kiš’s Pannonia. Krleža’s clock metaphors are found, so to speak, inductively: both in The Return of Filip Latinovicz and in “People Traveling” they are placed at the end of long descriptions, concluding exhaustive lists of the elements of the Pannonian space. Kiš’s clock metaphors imply a deductive method. The hourglass, as both title and opening image of the third part of Kiš’s trilogy, is a starting point from which the historical space of Pannonia is reconstructed.

9. Garden, Ashes: opening Pannonia, fictionalizing autobiography

Garden, Ashes (1965), the first part of Kiš’s family trilogy, is also the first text where Kiš would take Pannonia as the predominant space. Pannonia returns as dominant space in the collection of short stories Early Sorrows, in the novel Hourglass and also in the radio play Night and Fog. Garden, Ashes is the story of the Sam family right before, during and after World War II. The narrator of the story is the son Andreas Sam whose main concern seems to be his father. The alcoholic, neurasthenic Eduard Sam, a Jew, has to fear for his life under fascist rule. At some point in the novel he leaves, never to return again. Andreas, his mother and his sister resume their lives; Andreas undergoes a kind of epiphany, the creation of his first poem. This is in short the content of the novel. Let us first locate Pannonia in Garden, Ashes. Where is it situated, and what positions do the characters take? Who focalizes whom?

An actual historical setting, the Yugoslav-Hungarian Danube basin in World War II, identified by the Fruska Gora, the hills along the Danube near Novi Sad, precedes and also closes Pannonian space. Imaginary Pannonia is thus embedded in historical space. It unfolds only after a golden period, a time of idyll during which Andreas’ I was still part of the family, the “we” that also includes his mother and his sister. Pannonian space unfolds simultaneously as the narrator’s I emerges from the family collective. The sunlight is gone, the day is just an ordinary one. The father, Eduard Sam, makes his appearance for the first time when Pannonian space has already unfolded. He is tied to Pannonia, his space of homelessness where he “played his role of the Wandering Jew” (200; page references are to the Serbo-Croat edition).

Gradually the adult narrator Andreas Sam emerges from his own naive childish voice. The reader is more and more aware that Andreas is not just a narrator, he is a literary narrator, a narrator who in retelling his childhood is first and foremost concerned with his own Bildung as a writer. He makes abundant use of metaphors, he points to his own use of simile, as it were, as to see whether they fit the reality he is re-creating:
The moisture on the ceiling has given form to a giant who has become our good spirit, the guardian of our house: full-bearded like the prophets of the Hebrews, he holds in his right hand the tablets, in his left our lamp with porcelain that resembles an upside down spittoon – a comparison taken literally by flies. (29)

As a narrator, Andreas Sam consequently uses a style in which an allegedly prior reality checks and sometimes corrects the language used to evoke it. Andreas Sam does not attempt to conceal his literary intentions to embellish his past reality. He shows his cards while writing. Pannonia as a setting is also part of his creations. He willfully constructs Pannonia and situates his father in this space, as a figure in a painting:

When we moved to the village, my father could no longer hide. One day in spring, at the time of one of his sprees, I caught sight of him in his true form: he was walking along the embankment of the swollen river, returning unexpectedly after a six-day trip. We thought that he might have lost his way in the Count’s forest or run away, guided by his star. As he walked along the embankment in his black frock coat, swinging his cane high in the air, swaying on his feet like a ship’s mast, his celluloid collar yellowed, staring into space through his steel-rimmed glasses, my father became a part of the landscape, as if he had climbed into a picture-frame, and he lost his air of mystery totally. (98)

Eduard Sam, the father, tries to evade his son’s gaze. He is more absent than present and he engages his own son like a stranger. Only on one occasion do they really talk: the father, as Andres recalls it, made some kind of confession to him which he “didn’t really understand” (125). They are in the café at the railway station and his father begins after a long, painful silence:

My role as a victim, which I have been playing with greater or lesser success all my life – we all act our lives, our destinies, after all – that role, as I said, is gradually coming to an end. You must remember this once and for all, young fellow, you can’t play the role of a victim all your life without becoming one in the end. (124-5)

After this meeting they never really talk again: “This unique moment of sincerity and lucidity was broken by the arrival of the train. My father left a lordly tip on the table and took his secret with him to the grave” (126). The son’s view of the father escaping him is not over yet, however. The father returned a few times (from his detention, the reader grasps although Andreas Sam is reluctant to give precise information), sent a letter and disappeared again for a number of years: “He was ashamed, or else some important affairs prevented him from writing […] Sometimes he comes disguised as a traveling salesman or a West German tourist in riding breeches, pretending not to know a single word of our language” (139). The last time he appeared was “two years ago” – to be precisely twenty two years after the father packed his belongings and left his family behind.

This time the father is the head of a delegation of former concentration-camp inmates, survivors of Auschwitz and Buchenwald. Andreas relates how he ran into him in the street, began to follow him and finally addressed him in a bar. There, according to Andreas, the father denies his paternity, claiming that his name is “Eduard Kohn, from Germany, and I have nothing to do with you, young fellow” (141). Andreas insists and Eduard replies:
“Even if what you say is true, young fellow, that is to say, that I am your father, I have a perfect right not to remember. Do you know, young fellow, how many years have passed since then? Twenty years, young fellow, twenty years.” (141)

And this is not the last of the father’s appearances. Andreas goes on to relate how his father “published books under a pseudonym [...] and in his memoirs he heavily retouched the images of my mother, my sister and myself and spoke of himself with caution, leaving his readers deprived of autobiographical details” (141).

Andreas tries to approach him, the father escapes. This at least is how Andreas presents their relation. But it is more complicated than that. Andreas as a narrator is for his part not just a writer-in-spe, he fabulates, he is an enchanter. His attempt to situate his father in an imaginary space, Pannonia, as if the father failed to become an actual person already during his lifetime, relates on a more general level to Andreas’ indirect way of narrating. Another symptom of this evasive style is Andreas’ meddling with the reading pact. As a narrator, he insists on his family name. His father, when he states that his actual identity is Kohn and not Sam, contests Andreas’ identity.

The name Kohn is not accidental. It occurred in the travelogue “An Excursion to Paris”, written in September 1959. Roaming the streets of Paris, Kiš writes after a long and lyrical list of names of streets and metrostations: “I now leave aside this intimate devotion of mine to names, although I still burn with desire to write instead of this travelogue an International Bus, Ship, Rail and Air Travel Guide (modeled after Eduard Kohn)” (549). Much later, Kiš avowed in “Life, Literature” that Kohn was the father’s surname before he magyarized it into “Kiš”. The Travel Guide really existed, the author was not Eduard Kohn but Eduard Kiš, the father of the author, who wrote it in the capacity of official of the Yugoslav Railway. It was published in the 1930s in Novi Sad. It also appears in Garden, Ashes, the first part of Kiš’s trilogy: here, the author is Eduard Sam, Andreas’ father.

So when it comes to the conflicting proper names in Garden Ashes, it is Andreas’ word against that of his father. If we go along with Andreas, a fictional pact is established that distinguishes author from narrator. If we follow the father, his uncertain proper name enables (at least) an autobiographical pact: behind Eduard Sam emerges Eduard Kohn, who is a historical figure: Eduard Kiš before he assimilated by magyarizing his surname. Andreas is, then, not who he claims he is. He is an unreliable narrator. Moreover: it transforms Pannonia, the space of the father, into historical space and brings the holocaust, which Andreas has left mostly out of his version of the family history, to the fore as the predominant reality.

Pannonia in the novel unfolds as soon as Andreas realizes the meaning of his name and his surname. This is also the moment when he, as narrator, distinguishes between himself as a speaking person and the family collective (without the father, however). The opening of Pannonian space thus occurs when the fictional pact is established. When the father denies his paternity, he once more hides from his son but he does present himself openly as the person he was before he assimilated by magyarizing his name. We now see that space parallels the double, contradictory reading pact: behind imaginary Pannonia lurks a historical reality. This is not the reality of the time of writing (with which the time of the return of the father as Eduard Kohn coincides!), nor the reality of World War II, the remembered time of the narrator’s youth. This is pre-national reality before assimilation, which in the case of the father meant a reality of migration. Andreas not just conceals the holocaust, he denies the family history before assimilation.

First two more instances of Andreas’ evasive style. In addition to his particular use of metaphors that allegedly refer to an a priori reality, Andreas presents as metaphors what are actual, historical events. There is the star of David which the historical Eduard Kiš had to carry. “Life, Literature” mentions the crucial role of the yellow star during a pogrom.
story Kiš tells is that by baptizing him in a Serbian orthodox church in Novi Sad, his father saved him from the obligation to carry a yellow star. Kiš adds that the theme never made it into the family trilogy because "it seemed too strong, too charged; like many other episodes I've been unable to neutralize with an ironic counterweight. There is something shameful about suffering" (237). Yet the yellow star is not entirely absent from Garden, Ashes. It is present in metaphors. Andreas presents the family's social downfall as follows: "Soon after, guided by my father's star, we moved to the suburbs, next to a railway siding" (54). The father's star continues to guide them: "I am sitting in the sleigh, next to my mother, my eyes glistening, poisoned by my father's messianism. His words imprinted on my mind like a brand. I am beginning to feel the curse that is pursuing us" (63). U čelo, "on my front" the original says. The phrase returns in the opening of Early Sorrows when wild chestnuts start falling off the tree "dizzying, like stars" (7). Here the text changes from chestnuts to human beings: "Therefore his mother [Andreas' mother] will always be able to recognize him – by the star on his front" (7; my trans.).

When Andreas begins to realize what makes the father different from the others and what, therefore, makes the family liable to persecution, he stops following his father's star. Instead he portrays his father in pursuit of his own star as floating, lost in Pannonian space:

[the father] would leave without a word, resuming his ingenious soliloquy, and return late at night without telling us where he had been. Peasants and shepherds told us later that they had seen him deep inside the Count's forest, some ten kilometers away from our village, or even further away, in some other district. He would come home only to shave, change his collar and catch a nap, speaking to no end and refusing to eat for fear we might poison him. He subsisted on wild mushrooms, sorrel, wild apples, and birds' eggs that he took from their nests with the hook of his cane. And in the summertime, we would come across him unexpectedly in the fields, his black derby emerging from the fiery wheat, his glasses flashing in the sun. He moved through the fields like a sleepwalker, lost in thought, waving his cane high in the air, following his star, which he would lose amid the sunflowers, only to find it again at the edge of the field – on his greasy black frock coat. (104)

The star designates the father's fate. Andreas allows the historical meaning of the image only after he has detached himself from his father. Thus switching between literal and metaphoric language is part of Andreas' strategy to conceal the historical fate of his father. Metaphor he uses to bring to the surface the story – the version of his biography – that saved his life: his mother's Christianity. The story of his Bildung will be entirely set in a discourse of sin, remorse and penance, a Christian discourse. The more he moves away from his father, the more the gap between himself and his father, the more the reader realizes that it is Andreas who is assimilating. The father's return under his original Jewish name Kohn is a reminder of their common past. The reader in retrospect begins to doubt Andreas' story. Doubt even infects the idyllic opening of the novel. What Andreas presented here as a golden age in the triangle mother-sister-himself, without the father, also turns out to be a distortion of facts. The father was present all the time, but he was confined to Pannonian space.

Let us now reconsider the opening in detail. It begins with the family's morning rituals and moves on with a description of a walk through the street with the wild chestnuts, a central place in the trilogy, always the locus of Andreas' search for his lost past. Follows a description of fräulein Weiss; the family encounters boy scouts who are Volksdeutscher; they then take a local train to the Fruška Gora hills and discover a castle with a garden which they will visit "throughout that summer"; they end up in a downpour; they hurry home through the forest where they witness a horrible scene, a herd of buffaloes drowning in a swamp; when
they return, the autumn offensive has started: the war has begun. This opening is framed by the boy in bed, reluctant to open his eyes. The intertextual reference, part of Andreas’s pose as a literary narrator, is the opening of Marcel Proust’s *Combray* and *Albertine Disparue*: Marcel in bed with his eyes closed, describing his surroundings. In Kiš’s opening Andreas holds his eyes closed whereas his mother enters; he can describe the scene because he knows it by heart. He only opens his eyes after the idyll, when the opening scene continues with the mother entering the room, this time announcing that “your uncle is dead” (15). The whole opening then, is framed by the morning scene. Set between the moment when the boy still dreams with his eyes closed and the moment he opens them, the idyll, the last golden summer before the war, is merely a postponement of the news of his uncle’s dead.

In retrospect, the contents of the idyll take an entirely different shape. They become a foreboding of the deluge which opens with the announcement of the death of a relative and occurs in Pannonia. In the opening, space is still idyllic:

The branches of the wild chestnut trees on our street reached out to touch each other. Vaults overgrown with ivy-like leafage thrust in between these tall arcades. On ordinary windless days this whole architectural structure would stand motionless, solid in its daring. From time to time the sun would hurtle its futile banderillas through the defense leafage. (8)

But once the Pannonian space has unfolded and the boy knows about the death of his uncle, the same street looks different. The boy has just heard the news about the uncle’s dead: “I looked at the sky through the bare branches of the wild chestnut tree. The day was ordinary, routine” (15). Follows the boy’s understanding of his own mortality. During the summer the leafage protected him, now the branches are bare, and, we may add, the banderillas can hurt him. Why banderillas? A mere metaphor, mere embellishment? Intended or not, the choice of words reveals a delicate game with literal and figural language, direct and indirect narration. The only beings close to bulls are the buffaloes that Andreas, his mother and his sister see drowning in an instantaneous swamp caused by the downpour. The downpour is introduced with a presentiment of the mother. Standing on the bridge they watch the Danube, whose waters “were strangely altered, a muddy green, full of some dubious sediment that meant showers somewhere in the *Schwarzwald* [Switzerland in the translation!]. Running through the forest, they realized they were lost, “in vain did my mother attempt to hide the fact from us” (14). The mother “crossed herself, stopping abruptly” as she saw the buffaloes appearing:

A herd of black buffalo charged out of the woods, thundering like a regiment of cavalry, veiled in mist, suicidally resolved to resist the onslaught of the water, to silence the ironic chorus of the frogs. In close formation, horns in attack position, the buffalo were leaping out of the woods, marching fearlessly with a Prussian step toward the swamps. At that very instant, the rain stopped, and we succeeded – at the last moment – in reaching the main road. From where we stood we could see the buffalo vanishing into the muddy quicksand, a cleverly prepared trap. [...] My mother, affected by the gruesome sight and aware of the danger we had eluded, crossed herself once more. (14)

The scene is in every respect the reverse image of the story of the father in Pannonia. The mother crosses herself twice, a sign of her Christianity. What they watch alludes to the Pannonian deluge that is to follow: barely escaped death, observed from the side; Danubian mist, swamp and mud anticipating Pannonian space; even the region from which the threat is coming, is alluded at: the sources of the Danube in the *Schwarzwald* – Germany. And yet
Andreas, who is the narrator of all this, gives no definitive clues. For instance: we can link up the banderillas with the buffalo who then would be the victim—and yet they march “with Prussian step.” A struggle is announced but it is unclear who shall play the aggressor and who shall play the victim. Furthermore: who shall remember which events and from which perspective? Perhaps it is meant to remain vague, in anticipation of the father’s lesson to his son about the role of victim he played: it is unclear up to the end whether Andreas will identify with the victims or not.

Thus in Garden, Ashes, Andreas merely suggests his father’s biography; he opts for his own Bildung as the more important version of his family story. Although he claims he needs the father, for instance when he complains that ever since his father vanished from the story, from the novel, “everything has come loose, fallen apart” (175), he concludes with his epiphany, the birth of his first poem. Although his father is obviously a lunatic, Andreas has by now become unreliable too, albeit for different reasons. He might be a different person than he claims to be (in this, it is his word against his father’s). His evasive narration, his indirect rendering of facts as well as his choice for a style which on more than one occasion concealed rather than added to our understanding of his life story, reminds us of the grand eloquence of his father. Finally: Andreas gives countless hints that a different story may underlie his autobiography, which makes him either manipulative and unreliable or, like his father, unable to distinguish fact from fancy, reality from illusion. The novel thus ends in contradiction: we can either accept or reject Andreas’ account. The two family identities, the one before and the one after assimilation, exist next to each other.

After Garden, Ashes, the novel Hourglass presented only the reality of the father. Here, Pannonia dominates from the first to the last page. Krleža’s Pannonia, in Garden, Ashes still represented on the margins (for instance, Andreas’ fascination with Christianity), has in Hourglass entirely been replaced by intertextual allusions to Kafka and Schulz. Hourglass gives the full reality of those who are excluded from the national communities. There, Jewish identity is not a matter of choice: it is forced upon E.S. In Hourglass too, there is trouble with the reading pact: here, the father is directly linked up with the author’s father’s biography through the insertion of an authentic letter, a historical document. Central Europe appears on the margins of the novel’s geography, linking the father’s Pannonian biography to what Kiš subsequently rewrote into Central European biographies.

Thus Kiš’s Pannonia is both historical and imaginary: it depends on who focalizes whether it emerges as a historical reality or not. It is also a transitory space: it lies in between, connects and dissects, national and a-national homelessness. Through Pannonia, Kiš opened a corridor that allowed him to situate his family history outside national space. Later on, the idea of Central Europe affirmed the individual fate of his family as a tradition, a shared experience. This evolution of Pannonian into Central European space explains why Kiš’s traveler in “A and B”, quoted right at the beginning of this chapter, found Pannonian space deserted: its sole inhabitant, the father, had moved to Central Europe.
1. From an actual to a metaphorical lingua franca, from linguistic to literary multilingualism

Before Péter Esterházy said farewell in 1991 to his Central European brethren in the novel *Hahn-Hahn Grófnő Pillantása* (The Glance of Countess Hahn-Hahn. Down the Danube), he wrote a novel which can be considered in many ways the twin book of his Danube novel. The *Book of Hrabal* (1990) also presents Central European colleagues and themes, but this time from the perspective of language, multilingualism, as opposed to the travelogue-pastiche in *Down the Danube*. A rather short and highly playful novel, it makes abundant use of parody and quotations, bringing together a character who as a writer is commissioned to write an essay on Bohumil Hrabal and his wife who falls secretly in love with the Czech author; all of them are watched by a God-character and his two angels disguised as pre-1989 secret police officers; to which are added the Kafka-Milena letters as well as Julio Cortazar’s tribute to Charlie Parker, who again teaches God to play the saxophone. The novel may be somewhat “noisy” and “a little blurred”, to repeat the phrases Esterházy used in his introduction to Kosztoláiny’s *Skylark*, yet a good opportunity to pick up various themes that have been running through this thesis.

From the various narratives of Esterházy’s Hrabal novel I chose here the legend of Babel to force my way into the last thematic sphere of fictionalized autobiography I shall discuss: Central European multilingualism, by which I mean a condition of writing in a language that co-exists with other (national) languages in the same regional literary culture. The designation Central European points here to a specific historical circumstance: a multilingual consciousness after the disappearance of German and Germanophone (and somewhat different - Yiddish) culture as a lingua franca. As Esterházy’s Hungarian characters all in their own way contact the Czech writer Hrabal by either writing about him, as the writer does, or writing letters to him and dreaming about him, as does Anna, his wife - an I, a first person narrator is slowly ascending the tower of Ulm. This narrator remains anonymous throughout the novel. He often poses as the author, much in the way eighteenth-century novelists made their appearance among their own fictional characters; he comments upon the various plot lines and is in this respect akin to the first person narrator in Esterházy’s Danube novel. His ascension of the tower of Ulm is a pastiche on the story of Babel in Genesis. Although Claudio Magris distinguished two sources of the Danube in his *Danubio* (one in Donaueschingen, the other in Furtwangen), Ulm for Esterházy is the German starting point for what rapidly turns into a Central European, or East-Central European, a Danubian journey:

The legend that man is closest to God at the top of the church tower of Ulm must have originated from this. (At any rate, I did my bit and climbed up; of the 768 steps mentioned by the guide books, I counted 761, then, with trembling knees sat for a long time by the bank of the Danube, trying to imagine a water molecule, a particle of water, reaching Budapest, and even beyond…) (149, page references are to the English edition)

The Tower of Ulm allows him an overview (through the eyes of the God-character) of the landscape of his own novel. Thus it not just opens the thematic sphere of the later Danube
novel but also spots the figure of Hrabal and so establishes literary ties that transgress linguistic borders, here the Hungarian-Czech linguistic border. The I’s gaze is both ironical and tragic. He watches from outside Central Europe: German and Germanophone culture are no longer present inside East-Central Europe. Esterházy needs a deity who is unlimited both in time and space to restore a gaze that encompasses the historical multilingualism of the region.

The obscure legend of the Ulm tower awakes another, archetypal legend: Babel. No narrative has given rise to so many uses and interpretations: as a story that grants spatial dispersal and migration an origin of linguistic diversity, it is in the Central European context predominantly associated with the oeuvre of Franz Kafka, and beyond, to those writers who were not firmly rooted in the national literary cultures of the region; Joseph Roth and Ödön von Horváth are certainly not less relevant names in this respect. Since the story in Genesis is as short as it is abstract, giving rise to all sorts of allegorical interpretations, let me recall its events here and thus present a working version on the basis of which we can formulate our questions as to the specific meaning of the legend for historical East-Central Europe – questions which shall lead us back in the end to Esterházy’s dialogue with Hrabal.

*The New English Bible* (Cambridge & Oxford University Press, 1970) renders the story as follows: “Once upon a time”, it says, “all the world spake a single language and used the same words” (13). Drifting in space man decides to settle: “let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and make a name for ourselves; or we shall be dispersed all over the earth.” God sees the human endeavour and decides to “go down there and confuse their speech, so that they will not understand what they say to one another” an intervention motivated by fear that “now they, (…), one people with a single language, have started to do this, henceforth nothing they have a mind to do will be beyond their reach” (13). So God disperses man all over the earth; the unfinished city they leave behind is called Babel, “because the Lord there made a babble of the language of all the world; from that place the Lord scattered men all over the face of of the earth” (13).

Both the initiative to build the tower and to “create a name for ourselves” stems from fear of being dispersed. Man’s final faith, scattered and thus no different from before their enterprise, having lost their common tongue, seems a punishment for their ambition. When transferred from myth to history, the story not just looses the deity (and the moral implication of the story – punishment); time too looses its absolute point of beginning. As a result, the nomadic life of the community before its settlement becomes historical: there is no longer a definitive point of departure or arrival. Each community can apply the myth at will to its own history of migration and settlement. Both before and after the enterprise, man led a nomadic life: the Babel story records a failed attempt to fixate one’s position in the world both by settling down and by creating a common name. The sedentary life is equated with monolingualism.

The discourse community of Central Europe presented its history of multilingualism first and foremost as one of loss. It experienced its own linguistic life as one scattered over several national languages; in the absence of a lingua franca it sought coherence and unity on the level of metaphor, in a shared “tone and sensibility”. The competing histories of the national languages are often triumphant accounts of establishing one’s own tongue, or, in the words of Genesis, of “making a name for ourselves”, even though the triumphant tone veils agony over the historical fate – the freaks of history could have easily preferred one’s neighbour to rise out of its ashes – and over the arbitrary nature of one’s national language, visible in the diversity of dialects and a spastic denial of a multilingual past. Seen in terms of the Babel legend, the national perspective selects the first part as its founding myth, where successful settlement and linguistic unification coincide; the regional perspective of the
Central European discourse community frames its historical experience in terms of the second half of the legend: theirs is a myth of dispersion after having once been united.

Thus Esterházy's Hrabal novel, with its double-edged irony, enables us to discuss these two myths in detail, to lay bare their rhetorics and compare them to their historical circumstances. The chapter shall start with a comparison of the linguistic life of Franz Kafka, a writer whose multilingual experience, according to George Steiner, has become iconic of "the impossibility of genuine human communication as such" (After Babel 65), to that of Miroslav Krleža, a Croatian writer firmly rooted in national consciousness who left a memoir unique in kind: a linguistic autobiography. Kafka is part of the intertext of Esterházy's novel, Krleža is not. However, since the latter's reflections on multilingualism can be related to matters of language and narrative form, specifically to a historically determined relation between author, narrator and their stories, it is highly relevant here. Because – and this leads me to my last introductory remark – The Book of Hrabal not just thematizes multilingualism, it also poses fundamental questions about the central topic of this thesis: blurring of autobiographical and fictional narrative strategies, the meaning of the proper name in autobiography and in fiction, and – central in Esterházy's novel – the question whether or not the author should represent someone else's consciousness, and the effects of his choice upon matters of genre. The device of presenting a person's inner life, making his or her mind transparent, is in Esterházy's novel ironized, ridiculed and yet applied as the dominant narrative technique. As the novel is about marital issues – writing husbands with wives discontent about their double role as muse and mother – the implications of the narrative device which lays bare the mind of a real, genuine fellow human being, shall be brought here to a head.

2. Multilingualism and the nation and multilingualism beyond the national communities

Probably the first profound encounter through direct translation between Germanophone culture and one of its eastern neighbors are Jakob Grimm's translations of South-Slav epic poetry and Goethe's inspired reviews (Goethe refers to "Serbian" poetry). To be sure, Goethe himself had early on in his career been engaged in translating the famous Hasanaginaica (Hasan Aga's Wife, or: "Klaggesang von der edlen Frau Asan-Aga", as Goethe renders the original) which Johann Gottfried Herder published in his Volkslieder (1778) as a specimen of Naturpoesie under the heading "Morlackische Lieder", using the name the Venetians gave to the inhabitants of the Adriatic coast of the Balkan peninsula. Goethe's source text was Alberto Fortis' collection of folk poetry Osservazioni sopra l'isola di Cherso ed Osero (Observations on the islands of Cherso and Osero, Venice, 1771). The abbot Fortis again based his renderings on Andrija Kačić Miošić's Razgovor ugodni Slovinskoga Naroda (The Pleasant Conversation of the Slovene People, Venice, 1756) which had presented highly stylized versions of oral folk poetry. When Goethe many years later wrote his reviews of Grimm's Serbische Lieder (Serbian Songs), direct translations from the Serbian were available. It is here that Goethe, besides simply informing his Germanophone audience about the cultural and historical context of Serbian folk poetry, comes to some sort of a translator's aesthetic. He admits that his indirect rendering of more than forty years before displayed obvious shortcomings: "weder konnte ich einen Hauptbegriff fassen noch die Abteilungen charakterisch sondern" (416). But now that a direct German translation is available, he praises German for its ability to adapt to the strangeness of these songs. Moreover, reflecting on the universal and the specific in a nation, he implicitly formulates what translation should aim for. "Das Besonderste aber eines jeden Volks befremdet nur," he writes, "es erscheint seltsam, oft widerwärtig, wie alles Eigentümliche, das wir noch nicht in einen Begriff auffassen, uns noch
nicht anzueignen gelernt haben" (409). As a mediator between nations, German distinguishes itself because it "entsagt allem Eigensinn und fürchtet nicht dass man ihr Ungewöhnliches, Unzulässiges vorwerfe" (417).

Goethe’s vision is open and tolerant, in that it makes its mother tongue subservient to the original. There is a qualitative difference between the German and Serbian literature and languages, in that it is hard to imagine that the latter would provide the same openness as the former, but this is a Herderian difference between Kuns- und Naturpoesie, and not necessarily a relation of dominator and dominated. What is clear however is a rather strict distinction between nations, between which poetry serves as a channel of communicating, the genre par excellence that rephrases the specific into the universal. Weltliteratur, world literature, is the stage where the nations meet and communicate, in Goethe’s view, on equal basis.

Today, almost two hundred years after Goethe wrote his reviews (between 1820-1826), the linguistic situation has profoundly changed. The English language has taken over the mediating role of German. What occurred in between Herder and Goethe’s reconnoitering of the literatures east of their own linguistic realm and the post 1989-situation is the appearance and disappearance of German as a lingua franca. To be sure, to mediators like Jernej Kopitar and Vuk Stefanović Karadžić, German was already a lingua franca, what Latin had been for ages. At the time, Grimm’s rendering of Serbian epic poetry into German was not just a translation into another European language, but into a universal Kultursprache. But with the emancipation of Jewish citizens in the Habsburg Monarchy German became a different kind of lingua franca. For the first time after the Central European landscape was transformed into a patchwork of national communities, citizens appeared whose language of modernity was German but who did not necessarily identify with national identity as such. This new form of bilingualism added up to the already existing multilingualism in the Habsburg Monarchy of emancipated national minorities like the Slovak, the Czech, the Hungarian and the Croatian who lead a (at least) double linguistic life, combining their national language with German.

Although often characterized as oppressive, Vienna’s language policy had complied to some degree with the striving for national emancipation. In the beginning of the 20-th century only one fourth of the population of the Double monarchy had German as its first language. As of 1849 the policy had been to appease the self-emancipating vigor of the non-German national languages. Announcements in the Reichsgesetzblatt in Croatia and Bosnia were published in ten languages, among them German, Italian, Hungarian and also “Serbo-Ilyrian”, the latter both in Latin and Cyrillic script. The prevailing response to multilingualism up to the 20-th century seems to have been negative. And not only politicians disapproved: writers too had second thoughts. Motives of language purism were very strong. Krleža was a case in point. And also Ivo Andrić, whose early career was typical of young Slav intellectuals in the Double Monarchy: he studied in Vienna, Prague and Krakow and had a fairly good knowledge of Slovene and Czech besides the languages of the classical gymnasium. In his novella Prokleta Avlija (Devil’s Yard, 1953), the central character Čamil, born in Smyrna (Izmir) and a child of a mixed Turco-Greek marriage, mistakes his own identity for that of an old Ottoman pretender to the throne from a distant age. As a token of his madness, he “speaks in tongues”. His case, it is suggested, seems a combination of racial impurity and social intolerance; multilingualism is the symptom. The multilingual Ödön von Horváth explained in a number of interviews and autobiographical sketches that as a school boy he had not mastered any language in full (183); that when he came to Germany for the first time he could not read the newspapers because he did not know the Gothic script, although his mother tongue was German (183). He implicitly responds to ideas about language purity and racial identity when he writes that his case is proof that “auch ein nicht
'Bodenständiger', nicht 'Völkischer', eine heimatlose Rassenmischung, etwas 'Bodenständig-Völkisches' schaffen kann, - denn das Herz der Völker schlägt im gleichen Takt, es gibt ja nur Dialekte als Grenzen" (185). And he goes even as far as to speculate that his lack of early childhood recollections results from the language chaos that surrounded him as a child.

After World War II with racial theories discredited, the attitude toward language purism changed as well. At least on an international level. In the extreme versions of the national communities it still prevailed, for instance in Tito’s Yugoslavia as a subversive political discourse that challenged Tito’s federalist, supranational community. Thus Danilo Kiš once said following the attacks on A Tomb for Boris Davidović that nationalists in Belgrade considered him a Fremdkörper who’d better write his things in Yiddish. Another relatively recent case of language purism are the stances of the 13-th century monk and chronicler Gjon, narrator in the Albanian Ismail Kadare’s The Three-Arched Bridge (1978). The novel is strangely anachronistic: the monk distinguishes between “eleven Balkan languages” (5), a number reached only when one includes the recently established (disputable) standards of Serbo-Croat. Here too, strangers are identified by their language mishmash (“numbers in Latin, the verbs mostly in Greek or Slavic, and the substantives in Albanian and sometimes in German” 12). They have no identifiable country or region of origin; they build bridges and bridges bring evil (the novel concludes with the arrival of Ottoman forces).

Let me conclude this historical introduction with a downright political example of multilingualism’s internationalism on the one hand and its nationalist response on the other. Not so long after young Ődön von Horváth left Belgrade, another child arrived in Belgrade with her diplomat parents, her father being assigned the Czechoslovakian ambassador to the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. Madeleine Albright, the later US secretary of state in the Clinton administration, learned children’s songs in Serbo-Croat, which she in 1998, during negotiations with a Yugoslav delegation on the eve of the Kosovo war, reproduced as a token of her good will to the Serbian nation. She added to the surprised delegation that her father always said that if he had not been Czech, he would have preferred to be a Serb. Talk in the streets of Belgrade the following day revealed that Mrs. Albright’s good intentions had produced the opposite effect: her knowledge of Serbo-Croat (“our language” is the common phrase) enabled her to spy on the Serbian delegation, and, it was now commonly assumed, Mrs. Albright was one of those ex-Europeans whose sole intention in international affairs could only be revenge for the fate of her own people. Her initiative by no means tempered the paranoia of the Yugoslav delegation.

3. The nostalgia of the Central Europeans and their actual linguistic situation

What does the Central European discourse community of the 1980s refer to when it laments the loss of lingua franca? What was the actual linguistic situation in which Kiš, Konrád, Milosz and the others found themselves? Grief on the disappearance of German from the Central European realm did not automatically mean that one tried to establish literary connections with Germanophone contemporaries. The rather perplexed A.C. Hartmann, at one of the Central European roundtables is a case in point: if there was a sense of loss, it was by no means connected to a renewed interest for Austrian contemporaries. In fact, when Kiš writes about Peter Handke that “his work owes more to Faulkner and Parisian experiments in prose than to any writer on the cultural horizon of Central Europe” (“Variations on Central European Themes 107”), he really continues the blunt negation of any artistic meaning Vienna might have had for Central Europe which Krleža showed when he wrote about Rilke that “if he had written in French, literary historians might have placed him somewhere between
Samain and Jammes" ("Madžarski lirik Andrija Ady" 159). There is thus a certain political continuity, albeit for different reasons, between pre-WWII writers like Krleža who rejected Vienna and the Central Europeans who ignored Vienna. But then again, Kundera finds much of his own novelistic aesthetics expressed in The Art of the Novel in the work of Hermann Broch. I would say: nostalgia, yes, but selective. It was in fact a highly complex situation, where it is difficult to sketch more general tendencies. Let me try to state the linguistic facts of the 1970s and 1980s. Although the Central Europeans held multilingualism, and a specific artistic consciousness derived from that, in high esteem, not one of its members wrote multilingual works. As a reader, the bilingual Kiš comes probably the closest to a full bilingual consciousness. As a writer however, his work is a monolingual Serbo-Croat (although to call "Serbo-Croat" monolingual could be seen as problematic from a sociolinguistic point of view). Konrád wrote and writes monolingual Hungarian work. So does Esterházy - leaving aside his attempts at a dialogue in Czech between Hrabal and God at the end of The Book of Hrabal.

A common language of the Central European discourse community did not exist. The two round table conferences were held in the presence of interpreters. English of course was the language of Cross Currents: in that respect it seems to have replaced the role of German as lingua franca of internationalists. The literary career of Czeslaw Milosz illustrates the shift away from the European continent - in his case mostly French - to the English tradition. After he chose the United States as his place of writing, he created a parallel oeuvre in English next to the Polish originals. Most of his poetry in translation (almost all by now), is authorized. His main poetic dialogue, beside with his Polish colleagues, has been with English and American poetry, the earlier mentioned encounter with Seamus Heaney being a case in point.

Thus there was praise of multilingualism and a simultaneous dependence on one's mother tongue. Exile proved death. Danilo Kiš's "Variations on the theme of Central Europe" contains two passages on exile and the loss of the mother tongue. The passages are rather restrained, they apply the word "trauma" but do so in a discussion of Vladimir Nabokov, in order to highlight the specific situation of the Central European writer: coming from a literary tradition that is largely unknown in the West, his trauma is double. It is not just the loss of the mother tongue. Unlike the Russian's, his tradition is not familiar in the West. In an earlier version of the essay, Kiš intended to include a "portrait of the Central European writer", "not a type, not a montage, but a literary character, like in a novel (…) What does the Central European writer look like? Kafka? Broch? Musil? Krleža? Kosztolányi?" (Skladiste 385). The ensuing fragment describes highly emotionally how Central European multilingualism is inextricably bound up with a rootedness in the mother tongue:

He is about fifty years old now - certainly not younger, perhaps older - he lives in exile (like Kundera), writes in his Czech, Slovak, Polish, Hungarian, Serbo-Croat (Serbian or Croat) mother tongue, perhaps in Yiddish (although for that he seems too young to me), as if he wrote in some dead language, as a result of which it is all the dearer to him; he also speaks and reads French, German, Hungarian, Russian, he is bilingual from the day he was born and learned another two or three languages afterwards, and still they ask him, the sole guardian (as he sees himself) of that distant and nearby mother tongue, they ask him why he does not write in French, German, English - to which he answers for the thousandth time that one does not write with language alone, but with one's whole being, myth, tradition, consciousness and unconsciousness, entrails, memory, with all this, which is transformed into the automatic, into an accidental metaphor, in associations, in literary allusions, in idioms, in an unintended or intended quotation. Because - and that is what makes him a Central European writer - he drags with him the terrible burden of verbal and musical melody;
he drag along a piano and a dead horse, and everything that was ever played on that piano, and everything that horse carried in battles and defeats (...), words and melodies no one outside that one language understands, realia which in other languages require explanation in long footnotes (...) (315-16, my trans.)

Although insightful for the long (here not quoted) praise of his Serbo-Croat, Kiš does idealize his Central European writer. Limited to a generation - which means that only those born before WWII are Central Europeans, which would be in line with Kiš’s difference in stance as compared to the younger Esterházy - and yet even those older than fifty do not fully qualify. Milosz and Kiš did not know German, whereas both of them had in their own traditions (partially) Germanophone writers with whom they felt strong affinity. Bruno Schulz was bilingual and wrote a novel in German, now lost; Ödön von Horváth, Joseph Roth and later Elias Canetti wrote only in German, as of course did the Austrians Broch and Musil. Thus the loss of German did present a serious and painful void among national languages where a bilingual writer was already an exception. This then seems to be the situation after the disappearance of German: an increasingly intense regional dialogue of writers among whom real multilingualism was an exception. But so was real monolingualism: traces of common vocabularies were everywhere, for instance in discourses reminiscent of the Double Monarchy. All of these writers read each other’s work, either directly or in translation. Moreover, they all referred to the pre-WWII generation that either wrote in or was able to read German. As said before, the common response to the loss of German was one of nostalgia. At the desk, however, the mother tongue proved irreplaceable as the first and sole writing instrument.

As usual, only Péter Esterházy went as far as juxtaposing Central Europe to his mother tongue: “I think a writer belongs to a language and not to a region” (Budapest Roundtable 27). The others, aware that the mother tongue was primordial, persisted in their belief of a shared language in the metaphorical sense. The irony is (as so often with this writer) that only Esterházy presented an (attempt) at a multilingual work: The Book of Hrabal. Thus once again one has to distinguish between programmatic beliefs and the reality of writing. Before plunging into a discussion of older models of Central European multilingualism, one should take note of the paradox, for instance, between Kiš and Krleža. The former praised multilingualism and wrote monolingual works; the latter (as so many of his contemporaries) considered multilingualism a threat to (linguistic, racial, national) purity, though his fiction is a veritable tower of Babel - or rather: tower of Ulm. The first task is now to refine the pre-WWII national and the supranational position by means of a discussion of Kafka’s and Krleža’s stance toward their mother tongues and the other languages in their linguistic reality.

4. Pre-WWII multilingualism (1): Kafka’s linguistic borderland

Unlike his peers Max Brod and Franz Werfel, Kafka grew up to become an almost fully bilingual, German-Czech speaker. Biographer Ernst Pawel notes that Kafka, who had first close contact with the Czech language as a young child through his slečna, the Miss Marie Werner, “always made it a point [at work] to have his letters to the director edited and corrected (...) he [Kafka] never trusted himself with the fine points of Czech grammar and spelling” (386), especially so after 1918, when the Republic of Czechoslovakia was founded and command of the Czech language became a sensitive political issue. The year 1918 proved another turning point after decades of turbulent debates on language. The first German-Jewish school in Prague was opened on May 2, 1782. In the following decades, these schools underwent a profound transformation from Jewish into German institutions. At the same time
the Czechs strove for language equality. When, for instance, in 1898 prime minister Badeni promulgated language reforms that gave Czech equal status with German, riots followed on the part of the German population which forced the emperor to fire Badeni and abrogate the new laws (Paweł 150), which again triggered violent response on the part of Czech nationalists. As for the Jewish citizens, when a first language census was held in 1880, two-thirds of the Prague Jews registered as Germanophone. Ten years later over fifty percent registered as Czech-speaking, a choice reflecting a pragmatic response to the rapidly growing economic and political power of the Czech nation. As for Yiddish, the former language of the Jews in Bohemia and Moravia: it was almost completely replaced by German. Underneath its officially professed language preferences, the Jewish community prottered a German-Czech bilingualism, with traces of Yiddish. As Zionism, Theodor Herzl’s national model of Jewish identity, gained popularity, serious and devoted study of the Hebrew language evolved.

Such was Kafka’s linguistic environment in which he launched his Germanophone work. Kafka seems to have been uneasy about his multilingualism. Interpretations tend to emphasize his negative attitude. Often quoted in this respect is a letter to Max Brod from 1921 where Kafka writes:

Weg vom Judentum, meist mit unklarer Zustimmung der Väter (diese Unklarheit war das Empörenende), wollten die meisten, die deutsch zu schreiben anfingen, sie wollten es, aber mit den Hinterbeinchen klebten sie noch am Judentum des Vaters und mit dem Vorderbeinchen fanden sie keinen neuen Boden. Die Verzweiflung darüber war ihre Inspiration. (337)

Kafka’s saw his Jewish contemporaries as attempting to get away from their milieu without succeeding in really cutting off ties, whereas the connection in the new milieu did not materialize, at least not satisfactorily. The attitude toward the new milieu, Prague German, and through Prague German contact with the literary centers of Berlin and Vienna, is also problematic. Witness Kafka’s statement that his German is “a stranger’s child snatched from the cradle.” Related to this is his notorious difficulty with writing as such. In the same letter to Max Brod from 1921 he writes about

drei Unmöglichkeiten, (die ich nur zufällig sprachliche Unmöglichkeiten nenne, es ist das Einfachste, sie so zu nennen, sie könnten aber auch ganz anders genannt werden): der Unmöglichkeit, nicht zu schreiben, der Unmöglichkeit deutsch zu schreiben, der Unmöglichkeit anders zu schreiben, fast könnte man eine vierte Unmöglichkeit hinzufügen, die Unmöglichkeit zu schreiben [...]’ 337-338).

No wonder that the legend of Babel fascinated Kafka. Twice, in “Das Stadtwappen” (The City Arms) and “Beim Bau der chinesischen Mauer” (The Great Wall of China), he offered specific commentaries in the style of Talmudic exegesis. George Steiner even goes as far as to read in Kafka’s confessions to Brod, as well as into his tales, “a continuous parable” of a belief in “the impossibility of genuine human communication as such” (After Babel, 65). In a separate essay from 1992, entirely devoted to Der Prozess, Steiner interprets the strangeness Kafka felt within the German language in terms of borrowing and interest. “The translucency of Kafka’s German, its stainless quiet, suggests a process of borrowing at high, very nearly intolerable interest. Kafka’s vocabulary and syntax are those of utmost abstention from waste: as if every German word and grammatical resource had been drawn from an unforgiving bank. To write in German was to be in debt” (“A Note on Kafka’s Trial” 242).

The tendency has thus been to stress what Eva Ziarek has called Kafka’s rhetoric of failure, efforts to communicate that are doomed from the outset. But just as the Croat Krleža
was by confession a language purist and a multilingualist in practice, so one can distinguish between Kafka’s rhetorics, his intention and the actual effect his texts had on the reader. There is, for instance, a paradox in that someone who expressed so many agonies over the impotence of his language, could prove to be such a fertile correspondent. Some of his epistolary tactics and strategies are beautifully described in Elias Canetti’s *Der andere Prozess* (1968), a reading of Kafka’s *Der Prozess* in the context of Kafka’s correspondence with his fiancée Felice Bauer. When correspondent Kafka found himself in a bilingual situation, corresponding with Milena Jesenska, language became a central issue. For instance when Kafka asks Milena in one of his first letters to write in Czech: “Schon einigemal wollte ich Sie fragen, warum Sie nicht einmal tschechisch schreiben. […] tschechisch wollte ich von Ihnen lesen, weil Sie ihm doch angehören, weil doch nur dort die ganze Milena ist (die Übersetzung bestätigt es), hier doch immerhin nur die aus Wien oder die auf Wien sich vorbereitende” (9). A rhetoric of failure, or “impossibility of genuine human communication” may read into these bilingual issues a gap between two writing beings, yet in Kafka’s eyes Milena in her mother tongue is obviously closer to herself than in German. The closer his partner in dialogue is to herself, the better chances for genuine contact: “Liebe Frau Milena […] ich habe niemals unter deutschem Volk gelebt, deutsch ist meine Muttersprache und deshalb mir natürlich, aber das tschechische ist mir viel herzlicher, deshalb zerreist Ihr Brief manche Unsicherheiten, ich sehe Sie deutlicher, die Bewegungen des Körpers, der Hände, so schnell, so entschlossen, es ist fast eine Begegnung […]” (17).

The consensus about Kafka seems to be that he wrote in a linguistic borderland. Much has been made in this respect of a short passage from the diaries of 1911, in which Kafka reflects on what he calls *kleine Literaturen*, minor literatures. An unresolved issue to Kafka’s notion of minor literature is Kafka’s own stance toward it. Did Kafka consider himself and his Prague German, to be part of a minor literature? Or did he consider his own authorship as adhering and responding to the major German literature? Or should we look for a third position, one in between? What would that look like? The fragment from the diaries gives an ambivalent answer. Kafka’s examples here are Czech literature and the Yiddish literature of Warsaw introduced to him by his friend Yitzhak Löwy. In a page-long enumeration Kafka singles out “der Mangel bedeutender Talente” as one of the main characteristics of a minor literature as a result of which “der litterarische Streit bekommt in größten Ausmaß eine wirkliche Berichtigung” (207). The enumeration lists twelve “advantages” of a minor literature. The majority of these address the relation between literature and the nation. The list reaches a rhetoric yet strangely intimate climax in the phrase “dieses Tagebuchführen einer Nation” which brings Kafka’s writing at the moment he wrote down these reflections very close to the notion he seeks to describe - that of minor literature.

Kafka’s own summary of his reflections is ground for more ambiguity. His key words are “Lebhaftigkeit”, “Entlastung” and “Popularität”. He hastens to point out the feebleness of this description (“Wie wenig kräftig ist das obere Bild”) as opposed to “tatsächliches Gefühl” - which leads the reader to conclude that there is really an experience of a minor literature at the core of these reflections. But the exact nature of this experience, whether it is actual participation or merely a desire for participation, remains ambiguous. From this fragment it is therefore hard to tell whether Kafka’s perspective is from within a major or from within a minor language. It has been pointed out that Kafka’s conception of a minor literature is idealized. If it does refer to the literatures of the Central European nations, as his example of Czech literature suggests, then this contrasts sharply to the actual situation in Czech literature, which had a liking for myth rather than the small scale art Kafka imagined (Robertson 23). Idealization would suggest that Kafka was speaking from a position outside minor literature.

This is denied by Deleuze & Guattari’s *Kafka. Toward a minor literature*. They read in Kafka’s reflections on “kleine Literaturen” a theory of subversion, “detrerritorialization” is
their term. They consider Kafka’s oeuvre to be minor literature par excellence. But nowhere does Kafka say that his work belongs to a minor literature. Deleuze & Guattari are also not clear about how in Kafka’s reflections the notions of literature, language and nation are interrelated. From their resumé of Kafka’s ideas on minor literature it appears that they equate ethnicity and language. Their own examples, the Jewish literature of Warsaw and Prague (16) are inconsistent with Kafka’s: the literature from Warsaw in Yiddish and literature from Prague in Czech. Still, Deleuze & Guattari are categorical about the politics of Kafka’s oeuvre. They consider it a minor literature meaning that it intensifies the strangeness, the unfamiliarity and yet closeness inherent in Prague German, resulting in a “deteritorialization” of German literature. By this they seem to mean that within German the dominance of center over periphery is contested and subverted. They take Kafka as a starting point for a discussion of how a minor literature establishes its literary and linguistic space. For them Kafka’s linguistic experience is a model for all those “who write in a language that is not their own” (19):

This is the problem of immigrants, and especially of their children, the problem of minorities, the problem of a minor literature, but also a problem for all of us: how to tear a minor literature away from its own language, allowing it to challenge the language and making it follow a sober revolutionary path? How to become a nomad and a gypsy in relation to one’s own language? Kafka answers: steal the baby from its cradle, walk the tightrope. (19)

But in spite of these imprecisions: how different is Deleuze & Guattari’s reading of Kafka compared to those who adhere to the rhetoric of failure! This is its great merit: they have torn the oeuvre of Kafka out of its abstract context of religion-like exegesis and proposed a historical reading that addresses Kafka’s multilingual surroundings, from which they seek to formulate more general patterns between minorities and the language of the majority. Still, their representation of Prague’s linguistic environment, and therefore of Kafka’s, asks for correction. I would argue that Prague was not just a bilingual German-Czech environment, but a multilingual. Kafka wrote German not only against the background of the German tradition on the one hand and Czech on the other. Prague surrounded him with more than two languages: Yiddish and Hebrew were prominent, although politically and culturally marked. Kafka’s himself might have considered his German minor as opposed to Goethe’s German. But in the eyes of the Prague Czechs, his German was major, in spite of his own reservations. And: Kafka describes Czech as a minor literature, but this would certainly not hold from a Slovak point of view. In fact, it is problematic to entitle any language in East-Central Europe as unambiguously major or minor.

In this linguistic context, a writer’s choice for one language (although Danilo Kiš would say it is not a matter of choice but of fate) means therefore not only the exclusion of a second, but also of a third and sometimes a fourth language. Where there are constantly three or four languages present, whether active or passive, whether as national languages or local dialects, one could speak of a surplus of signifiers. In combination with the lexical similarities between several languages the result is a unique – Central European – mode of multilingualism with its own, specific mode of untranslatability.

It is in this revised multilingual context that I would like to reconsider Kafka’s stance toward his linguistic situation. As a starting point I propose another well-known diary entry of Kafka, about the failure of the German language to name those near to him:

Gestern fiel mir ein, dass ich die Mutter nur deshalb nicht immer so geliebt habe, wie sie es verdiente und wie ich es könnte, weil mich die deutsche Sprache daran gehindert

Kafka wrote these sentences in October 1914 during the time of his close acquaintance and friendship with Yitzhak Löwy. Confronted with what proved to be a rather short-lived but intense and important experience, the Yiddish theatre from Warsaw, Kafka complains about the same time in his diary: "Die Schauspieler überzeugen mich durch ihre Gegenwart immer wieder zu meinem Schrecken, dass das Meiste, was ich bisher über sie aufgeschrieben habe, falsch ist." (113). But only a few weeks later, on 18 February 1912, Kafka appeared as a public speaker in the auditorium of the Jewish Town Hall of Prague and delivered a speech on the Yiddish language which shows self confidence and the same skilled, perhaps even slightly manipulative tone he displays in many of his letters. The "Rede über die jiddische Sprache", was delivered to an audience of assimilated Jews, whose language was that of the major literature German. With obvious pleasure, Kafka assumes the role of a guide to a bewildered public (as he supposes) into the unknown domain of Yiddish verse and introduces the Yiddish language: "Der Jargon ist die jüngste europäische Sprache, erst vierhundert Jahre alt und eigentlich noch viel jünger" (422). Reasons for its strangeness might be found in the high coefficient of loan words:


Kafka’s sympathy is obviously with the "Jargon" he is introducing. Time and again he teases his audience by referring to their alleged "Angst", "dass man es fast auf ihren Gesichtern sieht" (422). Fear of strangeness, fear of the known and yet unknown that sneaks in through the back door into the German language. On a linguistic level, known and unknown elements take turns, with the expected result that "Mit all dem denke ich die meisten von Ihnen, sehr geehrte Damen und Herren, vorläufig überzeugt zu haben, dass sie kein Wort des Jargon verstehen werden" (423). Kafka gives the summaries of the three poems Löwy will recite, but this won’t help the audience in understanding Yiddish literature. The ground for the misunderstanding is the specific untranslatability of the "Jargon" into German: "Man kann nämlich Jargon nicht in die deutsche Sprache übersetzen" (425). The reason seems, as Kafka insists, the extreme closeness of Yiddish to German, and also the nature of their relation, that of a standard language and one of its "dialects": "Die Verbindungen zwischen Jargon und Deutsch sind zu zart und bedeutend, als dass sie nicht sofort zerreißen müssten, wenn Jargon ins Deutsche zurückgeführt wird, das heisst es wird kein Jargon mehr zurückgeführt, sondern etwas Wesenloses. [...] ‘Toit’ zum Beispiel ist eben nicht ‘Tot’ und ‘Blut’ ist nicht ‘Blut’" (425). He continues by saying that the "Jargon" can however be conveyed ("vermittelt") in French, as opposed to German.
I gather that, for Kafka Yiddish is untranslatable with respect to those languages that are close to it, which would mean not only German but also the other “Eastern European”, Romanian, Hungarian, Lithuanian and Slavic languages it borrows its lexicon from. Deleuze & Guattari seem to overlook this. For them, the loss of referentiality, of the “proper sense” of the word, takes place in between two languages: “There is no longer any proper sense or figurative sense, but only a distribution of states that is part of the range of the word. [...] There is no longer man or animal, since each deterritorializes the other, in a conjunction of flux, in a continuum of reversible entities” (D&G 23). To Deleuze & Guattari the loss of the figurative is irreversible. Once the signifier receives a Doppelgänger, once “Tot” is doubled as “Toit” there is no return to the earlier state. But what happens when one more signifier is added, or even two or three? Then Kafka’s reflections lead to an understanding of Central European multilingualism as a field where many languages meet and enter into a complex whole of double and threefold relations. Here, boundaries between languages change depending on one’s position in language and this position is never univocal. Prague German as the language into which the Prague Jews had migrated and settled was minor in relation to German. Seen however from the Czech national perspective, Prague German was certainly part of a major literature. In this multilingual field, the speaker never relates unambiguously to one language and one literature; nor can the author’s stance be univocal.

5. Pre-WWII multilingualism: Krleža’s linguistic restlessness

Hardly anyone today doubts Kafka’s stature as a major author. To the Croat Miroslav Krleža, however, this was not self-evident. He once said that for him, Kafka was a provincial phenomenon, more folklore than literature. To understand his statement, one has to take into account Krleža’s linguistic environment: for him, Kafka was first and foremost part of the Jewish Germanophone culture of Central Europe. Like Prague, Krleža’s Zagreb buzzed with German at the turn of the century, but also with Hungarian and with “Küchenkroatisch”, the local Croatian dialect with a corrupted German lexicon. This multilingualism, which Krleža referred to as a “linguistic chaos”, was an issue that had dominated the development of a national Croatian literary language from the first half of the nineteenth century onwards.

Krleža tended toward language purism. In 1942 he wrote: “Our main stylistic problem up to today is: how to dispose of Turkish, German and Italian influences” (Childhood in Agram 169; my trans.). At the same time, his writing teems with German and Hungarian dialogues and represents no less than a linguistic caricature of the Double Monarchy.

What is the Croatian language? This is today as much of a political issue as it was at the turn of the 19th and 20th century. The identity of the Croatian language entails much more than the differences with the Serbian language. For Krleža, the main issue is the creation of a national standard language out of an extremely diverse linguistic and historical situation. Krleža’s position is far from univocally national. In Djetinjstvo u Agramu (Childhood in Agram, 1942), he polemicizes with the whole of Croatian nineteenth century literature, but most of all with the so called Illyrians, the Croatian national movement from the first half of the nineteenth century that had standardized the Štokavian dialect as the literary language of the Croatian nation. Thus they brought together the renaissance and baroque literatures of Dubrovnik with South Slav oral literature. Illyrian Štokavian became the carrier of a national Croatian literature. As elsewhere, standardization was first a national and a linguistic project and only then a literary matter. Beside the new standard, there were at least two other dialects, the Ćakavian coastal dialect, and the Kajkavian, the Northern-Croatian dialect. Standardization, although it had succeeded, did not entirely silence the dialects. Aleksander Flaker notes in a discussion of Croatian dialect literature (327) that the choice for Štokavian
not only cut off literary traditions in the other dialects, but resulted, for instance in realist fiction, in a gap between the local speech of a region and its representation in the literary text. Kajkavian or Čakavian speakers were often represented as Štokavian, their speech interspersed with words from the original dialect, inserted as exotics. As Krleža writes, the result around 1900 was a “language chaos” on all linguistic levels, from the lexicon and the syntax even to the accent system. In *Childhood in Agram*, he distinguishes as many as five dialects or unofficial standards in the linguistic environment of the Zagreb of his youth (167).

It was to one of these dialects, the Kajkavian dialect of Northern Croatia, that Krleža turned for an alternative to the national Štokavian tradition. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Kajkavian, close to Slovenian, had been a fully developed literary language with dictionaries as well as high and low genres. By the time of Krleža’s childhood, the local elite of Northern Croatia used Štokavian. Kajkavian was no longer a language, it had effectively become a dialect. Listening to the speech of “domobrani”, Croatian soldiers in Habsburg service, Krleža wrote in 1916:

> This dying language [Kajkavian] has its own special sense of humor, and not one of our poets has a ready ear for these details. It has its own way of expression, its irony elevates it above reality, not by shooting into the sky like a rocket, but by blurring everything, all notions and all authority, slowly and stubbornly up to the point of meaninglessness. This language of ours, its corrosive phrases, kills all illuminated and heroic ideals, all notions and efforts, by decomposing them. It is a serf’s language. Always in a minor key. It spits at the boots of the lords that trample it. It neither carries away nor elevates, does not believe in anything except in a kind of Roman Catholic pessimism ending in the unavoidable equalizing of all life in death […] Its sarcasm […] is lethal, ridicules everything, vulgarizes and degrades everything above it, and is therefore disastrous for its own emancipation. (*Diary*, 16 March 1916, my trans.)

Kajkavian haunted Krleža throughout his life. It appears in direct speech in fiction, the WWI novellas *Hrvatski Bog Mars* (The Croatian God Mars, 1921), in the monologue of Valentin Žganec in the novel *Na Rubu Pameti* (On The Edge of Reason, 1938), in the dialogue of some of his plays, and most prominent, it is the major and only language of a cycle of poems Krleža wrote in the thirties, *Balade Petrice Kerempuha* (The Ballads of Petrica Kerempuh), grotesque carnivalesk poetry dealing with a peasant uprising in the sixteenth century.

Why was Kajkavian that attractive to Krleža? He often praised its authenticity, but the language of the *Ballads* is partially taken from seventeenth century Kajkavian dictionaries and is not identical to the living speech. It is a stylized version. When imbedded in a text situated in the contemporary world, Kajkavian is always a character’s speech, not the narrator’s. Krleža’s position outside Kajkavian is confirmed by his stance in *A Childhood in Agram*, where he sings the praise of the Kajkavian in the Štokavian Croatian standard. Part of its fascination, beside the attraction of its (quasi) authenticity, is perhaps that it is a language that failed to become the discourse of a nation. “A Vates that would make the Kajkavian resurrect from its grave was not predestinated.” (*Agram*, 162) To Krleža, Kajkavian reminds the community of its pre-national linguistic past.

*A Childhood in Agram* is an intellectual, literary and linguistic autobiography. Instead of mentioning the parents, this rather long, winding essay restricts the experience of the autobiographical self to examples, lists of impressions and memories that illustrate a more general line of thought. I discuss it in length here because its description of the experience of multilingualism resembles in some respects Kafka’s engagement with Yiddish. Kajkavian, as a dialect, contests the national Štokavian Croatian much like Kafka’s Yiddish challenges the
German of Prague’s assimilated Jews. In both cases, the dialects are presented as a remnant of the community’s past before the settlement. Indeed, both Kafka and Krleža approach the linguistic home established by their previous generation from an older perspective and thus lay bare a sense of inauthenticity, the artificiality of the linguistic home. At the same time, the challenger is not an alternative and the challenge results in an intermediate position, a borderland. If Kafka’s German is a “stranger’s child snatched from the cradle”, then Krleža’s empathy is with a disowned child, which at his intercession is re-accepted into the national cradle of Stokavian.

Kraleža’s autobiographical prose contains also a description of Zagreb’s specific multilingualism, both among the competing national languages and among the dialects within the national Croatian standard. Krleža relates this to a specific artistic consciousness, which can be translated, as I will suggest, into a specific Eastern Central European notion of linguistic identity: the linguistic self as a ventriloquist, so to speak, whose self-portrait is not drawn by a linguistic act of naming directly, but by repeating and quoting speech surrounding the self, from personal to collective discourses, from parents to institutions in society. This specific attitude of the autobiographical self toward its language shall pave the way back to the genre of fictionalized autobiography, to Bohumil Hrabal and Péter Estéházy. It will render a narrative counterpart to the experience of homelessness; together with the borderland, it can be linked up with the more dispassionate idea of the intermediate position.

A Childhood in Agram opens with a search for the first impression. The speaker makes an attempt at disengaging the first image from subsequent thought and language. This, however, distances him only further from his “direct”, his “unmediated” (“nesposredan”) gaze. Subsequent lists of childhood impressions (images from bourgeois life, from the Roman Catholic church, early aesthetic impressions and also the first experiences of the political agony over Croatia’s national past), are represented as irrevocable losses: words cannot retrieve these impressions. The next question introduces the figure of the artist and the stance he takes toward his own past and contemporary reality. Krleža criticizes academic painters as imitators; on the other hand, artists who present a political message in a work of art do not understand that true artistic inspiration has nothing to do with actual politics. The latter statement implicitly responds to the Charkov-doctrine of socialist realism: A Childhood in Agram, written in 1942, echoes Krleža’s fierce and ferocious debate with dogmatic socialists in the 1930s. His response to the Charkov doctrine is individualist. His alternative to either mimeticians or political artists is the artist as a player, in line with the child that does not distinguish between reality and play.

As the adult artist hovers between politics and autonomous art, so the child is also in an intermediate position. As an altar boy, young Krleža participates in an official, institutionalized rite and reproduces its discourse. Antithesis to Catholic metaphysics and Christian ideals about a martyr’s death, resurrection and ascension, is the folkloristic world of the grandmother. Her world is thoroughly Kajkavian. Her ideas are superstitious, to be sure, but powerful enough to contest Catholic metaphysics: “The Kajkavian baroque atmosphere in the surroundings of Čakovec and Varaždin, which in our peculiar circumstances, at the time, the turn of the century, was already vegetating, showing all signs of a hybrid threatened with extinction, after the Illyrian patriots had sentenced it to death sixty years earlier” (161, my trans). But Kajkavian remains a mere antithesis. Krleža quotes his grandmother but his own narrative is set in the Štokavian, national standard. The Kajkavian dialect always remained a secondary language in Krleža’s work. When it came into the foreground, in The Ballads of Petrica Kerempuh, it was highly stylized, Krleža’s own standardization based as much on 17th century dictionaries as on his grandmother’s speech. From Kajkavian, Krleža goes to the general linguistic situation of his childhood, which he describes as a “Babylonian mishmash” (164). Among the various dialects and jargons, Kajkavian is the hybrid powerful enough to
contest 19th century attempts at a standard language, yet never a candidate for a true, authentic language. Thus the autobiographical prose diagnoses the need for an authentic language, but fails to provide one. It does not conclude with epiphany, nor with the topos of the invention of an authentic style or an individual voice. It ends with a quote, an anathema banning the boy from the Catholic world he grew up in: “Conscious of my weakness, I carried my burden in sin about which the holy Theresa once said: un peccado mortal de los mas abominables, and on which the following verdict was pronounced: Ligatis manibus et pedibus mittite eum in tenebras exteriores!” (181)

This then seems Krleža’s answer to his own initial question. Closely related to his multilingual environment where various national languages, dialects and jargon co-exist, the artistic self is much like the ventriloquist who impresses young Krleža in the circus: made up of other’s voices that it reproduces ironically, or in denial. These voices reflect the diversity of the linguistic environment: in the literary text, they merge: Bakhtin’s “raznojazyöie” (polyglossia) becomes “raznore&e” (heteroglossia). This specific artistic consciousness, just like the self as a speaker never fully identifies with one of the available languages and dialects, develops no style of its own; if one can speak of a style, it is the style of the collage, of bric-a-brac, or, to stay with linguistic terms, that of the quotation.

6. Bohumil Hrabal’s bilingualism

Bohumil Hrabal’s Libeň-trilogy Sváth v Domě, Vita Nuova, Proluky, (Weddings at Home, Vita Nuova, Vacant Lots), published in 1986-87, runs from the aftermath of World War II until 1968, specifically in the linguistic wasteland after the extermination of the Jewish population and the deportation of Sudetes from Czechoslovakia. A significant number of the more than 700 pages deal with the painful memory of this lost multilingual world. However, the act of remembering is not straightforward: whenever there is lament, it is embedded in the text’s peculiar narrative situation. Let us recall: the author Hrabal presents as a first-person narrator his wife Pipsi (Eliška), who tells her own life as of the moment when she met the author – “Doctor Hrabal” as he is called in her text. Thus he himself, or rather his alter ego, is a dominant character in her account.

The only earlier instance of this device I know of, is Gertrude Stein’s Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. First published in 1933, Stein makes her partner Alice tell her life as of the moment she met Stein. These are Stein’s Paris years: Alice’s naïve style is at times hilarious, for instance when she describes their acquaintance with famous artists, like Picasso, Braque and others. The Autobiography was translated into Czech in 1952, so Hrabal might have read it. Though always generous with allusions and openly grateful whenever a device or an idea inspired him, Hrabal does not refer to Stein. The quasi-naïve tone of the narrative is identical in both texts. But at a closer look, the two texts differ profoundly. Stein makes sure to carefully distinguish the naïve comments of Alice from the sophisticated, “writerly” comments of her own fictionalized self. At the end, she discloses the illusion: “About six weeks ago Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography. You know what I am going to do. I am going to write it for you. I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it” (268).

Hrabal never discloses the illusion. Moreover, whereas the distance between Stein’s and Alice’s speech is fixed, that between Pipsi and Dr. Hrabal is not. Likewise, in Hrabal’s trilogy the sharp distinction between author and narrator is mitigated by a constant and smooth shifting of speaking figures: Pipsi as a narrator literally reproduces the discourse of
the other characters; she does not represent them by quotation or direct speech. As a result, the first person shuttles between the characters. Narrative form is not identical in the three parts of the trilogy. Part I and III are as described above, part II goes further and refrains from using interpunction. This author justifies this "diagonal reading" of his characters in his foreword to Vita Nuova:

I have not permitted myself this luxury like Joyce, who wrote Ms. Molly Bloom's morning monologue without interpunction only because Ms. Molly represented to him the Earth Ga who does not have grammar or interpunction herself... I have permitted myself this luxury of diagonal reading not only to appear where nobody expects you as Mr. Barthes says but also because I as an old man have the right to resist everything and everyone who wants to deprive me of my right to make mistakes or to accomplish that which I did not expect from myself I have allowed myself this luxury of diagonal reading because it is by the same method that I choose buried images from the past which surprise me just like those dadaist sentences and words were conjured from the surrealist hat [...] (181-182, my trans.)

Hence the author's intention in making Pipsi tell her life story in the first person; diagonal reading, "this skew probe", shall lead him to his own "semi-conscious and subconscious" (9). Starting with the moment she met the author right after World War II, Pipsi's account relates Hrabal's rise to fame as a writer, and the simultaneous fall — in her eyes — of this man who by no means displays the behavior appropriate for a well-known author. She describes her husband as a case of "formlessness", suffering a complete lack of style, ranging from his clothing to his literature. Her mother-in-law attributes this formlessness to the socialist system, which, having rejected the old world, failed to create a new style.

But Pipsi gets to tell her own story too. She is a Sudete or a Sudetendeutsche, and as such, although a minor during the war, she spent time in a camp during the purges after the war. During discussions with her husband, walking through Prague and visiting the Jewish cemetery, she changes from a German victim into someone, whose narrative remembers more than just the suffering of her own people. She develops beyond national consciousness: she feels the loss not just of her own nation but of the others as well. Her development takes place in constant interaction with "doctor Hrabal" whose provocations she counters and with whom she quarrels. Even their first kiss has a political taste to it:

It suddenly occurred to me that the doctor was really tactful and that he loved me, because he didn't say anything, whatever he would have said or would have liked to say, however he would have justified himself, it would only have made me more sad, because to the doctor I was a German and then I suddenly said... But doctor Hrabal, I went to Czech schools and my parents were expelled as Germans to the West but I stayed here, because I went to Czech schools like my brother Heini, because of those Czech schools they gave us Czech passports and that's why I'm here... The doctor leaned towards me, put a finger on my lips, I closed my eyes and he kissed me. (Svatby: 149-150  My trans.)

The fact that Pipsi is a Sudete is not just of political significance: it is a linguistic fact too. She receives German letters from her family in Vienna and her discourse is interspersed with German words. This alerts the reader to the artificiality of her discourse: she speaks and thinks in Czech, the interjected German words suggest bilingualism but it might very well be possible that in reality, Eliška thought in German. There is thus a certain inequality between the author and his narrator, narratively as well as linguistically, which Pipsi's attentiveness to
the weaknesses of the Hrabal figure only partially compensates. In a long scene at the heart of *Vita Nuova* the tension between the two erupts. Here, language (its hidden bilingualism), narrative form (the author Hrabal presenting his wife as a first person narrator) and style (absence of interjection) all come together. Who identifies here with what language? And what is the role of narrative form and style?

Once I spent a week with my husband in Krkonoše We stayed in the Jilemnice Hut in Upper Misečky Because as a student my husband had been in Lower Misečky and there as he pointed out he had stayed in Dreihäuser (*Tridomi*) with Herr Scharf [...] And then my husband showed me the Waldheim Café [...] but this all happened after forty-five when there was not one German left here in the Krkonoše Some had died in the war others had been killed with pickaxes and the rest had been heavy-handedly expelled [...]. (254-5 My trans.)

Pipsi relates how her husband during their walks in the mountains told her about his acquaintance with Sudetes; about the rise of nazism and the growing tension between Czechs and ethnic Germans. “My husband told me”, “My husband showed me” etc. are phrases which distinguish his speech from her’s. In their absence utterances have no definite speaker, as in “But this all happened after forty-five [...]”, which evokes the violent treatment of the Sudetes after the war. Not accidentally: “Dr. Hrabal” fulminates against the Sudetes and this one sentence, which describes their suffering, suggests that there was suffering on more than one side. This opens the comparison, who started the suffering, who suffered what, and who suffered most? “Whenever my husband would carry out his monologues he would get angry with all Germans in Bohemia and Moravia because the Second World War had actually started off with the Sudeten question when the Germans had betrayed our republic and introduced the slogan Heim ins Reich” (256). Doctor Hrabal continues to fulminate against the Sudetes. He also holds them responsible for the loss of bilingualism. When it comes to language, his sympathies are no longer purely national Czech (as when he referred to “our republic”). He laments the loss not just of Prague German but of “this even greater crime they committed [...] Because of their betrayal the beautiful German slang from Brno and Opava and Jihlava and the beautiful German dialect had also disappeared from the Slovakian Spišketal-valley the so-called Zipserdeutsch that they used to speak there and the Egerländerdeutsch nearby Cheb And my husband lamented the loss of this bilingual consciousness” (256).

The author Hrabal decides what Pipsi relates about their private German-Czech quarrel: whereas the doctor a few lines later gets to speak in the first person (“and I found it a shame and I was embarrassed about those Germans” 257), Pipsi keeps silent about her part in the discussion. Her first person returns only when she, still in the mountains, suffers an attack of vertigo – her dizziness as much a result of the alpine heights as of the fierceness of her husband’s discourse. In a scene sliding from the real into the symbolic, she stumbles, her husband falls and it is only because “my eyes at once hung on my husband’s eyes” (260) that she manages to reach the valley. From this one could conclude not only that the author Hrabal prompts Pipsi’s thoughts and speech but that the character “Dr. Hrabal” too restrains her: for it is his speech, his “monologue” which dominates their discussion. However “tactful” he may be (but this is the author putting his narrator words into the mouth!), he considers her faith during the purges, the humiliation she suffered (114), to be in full compliance with a slogan the Nazi’s themselves invented, “Jedem das Seine”; he repeats it over and over again.

Later on in *Vita Nuova*, however, Pipsi gets too speak freely about the German-Czech conflict, about the fate of the Jews and about her own role, as a member of a family that sympathized with the Nazis, and as a victim of the post-WWII purges. Of course, nobody ever
speaks directly in the trilogy, and especially in *Vita Nuova*. When, for instance, doctor Hrabal gets to speak in the first person (as above) it is still the narrator Pipsi who imbeds her husband’s speech in her own first person speech by quoting. Perhaps not in free, but in her own speech Pipsi describes at the end of *Vita Nuova* her visit to the Jewish cemetery in the Prague quarter Libeň, then to the central cemetery of the old town in Prague. Let me quote in full:

I couldn’t understand why the Germans but also the Czechs, hated the Jews and why I kept on hearing that Hitler had killed too few of them [...] I repeated to myself all those girls’ names... from Lea to Miriam and Rifke and Chave and Ciperle and Golde and Muskat and Liebele and Rehle and Guendl and Blumele and Telze and Nette and I understood that these little words just like the boys’ names like Jekoff and Marek and Elias and Chaje and Jehuda and Mendl and Gadl and Zalkind and Suskind and Smaje and Menachem and Ascher and Sander and Manasse -- all these were actually like German names and I felt that this cemetery with all the names was much dearer to me than all the other cemeteries and the tombstones were dear to me because nobody took care of them nobody stopped by here to poor fresh water and to bring fresh flowers this Libeň cemetery was completely deserted just like everyone and everything had deserted me and my father too and in fact what we had done to the Jews was done to us when they got even with us and so we had to leave our houses in ’46 just like the Jews before us [...] *Jedem das Seine* as it said on the gate of one of those concentration camps. (408)

Pipsi’s sympathy with Jewish victims stems from the language, from the closeness of the German and Jewish proper names, and from identifying her own faith with that of the Jews. The binding logic is the Nazi slogan, frequently quoted earlier by her husband. Thus part of the development of her consciousness is suggested by her husband. A large part, however is not. When she visits the central cemetery in Prague she reads the names on the gravestones: “I read the names insofar as they were not in Hebrew and again it astonished me why the Germans had to be the avowed enemies of the Jews whereas Jews often had German names as proper names perhaps slightly corrupted but precisely this slight corruption was much dearer to me than classical German the corruption made Yiddish pleasantly melodious like the Viennese dialect or the one spoken in Jihlava or Brno” (409).

This time it is Pipsi who laments the loss of bilingualism. Although her text is in Czech, her lament stems from a Germanophone perspective. It is the perspective of the German victim who has lived through the ferociousness of Czech hatred and revenge, which makes her, while watching old photographs of the demolition of the Prague ghetto at the turn of the 19th and 20th century, “realize” that “Like Hitler liquidated the Jews, the Czechs too hated the Jews just as much as the Germans, if the Czechs had the opportunity, even today they would liquidate the Jews” (410). Thus Pipsi not only gets to express her German perspective on the loss of bilingualism, but in the absence of her husband she reaches a “supranational” perspective. It is based on her painful personal experiences and her observation that only names engraved in the wall of the cemetery commemorate the vanished lives at Prague’s empty spots. Who identifies here with what language? And how does the ambiguous genre of the text affect the act of remembering the lost bilingualism? Both Pipsi and Dr. Hrabal identify with bilingualism; both lament its loss. Hrabal blames the Sudetes, Pipsi agrees but she also blames the Czechs. In the clash, Dr. Hrabal dominates. Pipsi can deal with her experiences and her observations only when she is alone. This is where the peculiar narrative form of *Vita Nuova* (and the other parts of the trilogy)
comes into play: what the author Hrabal in his foreword announced as a “probe” cutting into the subconscious, turns out to be a double-edged narrative technique. The proper names force the reader to read the text as an autobiography, but this is complicated in two ways. First, the author Hrabal and the character Hrabal should still be distinguished, for the narrator Pipsi always mediates between the one and the other. Secondly, although much of Pipsi’s account quotes other voices that also speak in the first person, her speech goes beyond reproducing her own speech and that of others. Her reflections, memories and thoughts make up a considerable part of her account. Furthermore, there are the hybrid sentences, utterances that cannot be ascribed to him or to her alone. Where both tend to identify and sympathize with the victims – albeit with different victims – intermediate sentences fill the interpersonal space between them. On a few occasions Dr. Hrabal takes his wife pars pro toto for the Sudetes, thereby politicizing her personal space. It is Pipsi who introduces a nuance between the personal and the political: the reader knows her experience and thus follows her when she distances herself from her husband’s views. In the trilogy, this is the point at which the distance between Dr. Hrabal and the reader is the largest. Here, the effect of fictionalizing autobiography can be felt most acutely. But all this takes place within the Czech language: the specific artistic consciousness of multilingualism is only suggested “between the lines”, in the tension between author, narrator and character.

7. Looking back at Central Europe from the tower of Ulm

In Esterházy’s The Book of Hrabal (1990), The Lord, after a chat with Bohumil Hrabal, looks down at Ulm to see how the tower is progressing. His gaze is timeless and so he can see both the original and the contemporary state of the tower, as well as the Central European hinterland. He towers over the figure of the first-person narrator of the novel, “he sees what I’m thinking, everything that I have forgotten by now and do not wish to conjure up in my fantasies” (164):

he saw everything simultaneously, the sea of space, the current of time, the branches of a rose bush, the Black Forest and the Black Sea, John Hus and a fatal typo in a grade B novel, the battle of Thermopylae, the flames of Jan Palach and the birth of a little boy called Marcel […] , he saw the entry of Soviet tanks into Prague, Budapest, Moscow and San Diego, he saw a traveling salesman from Harry Karel Klofanda and Co., an industrious ovule, a corpse with a fly in the public cemetery in Munich, a complex sentence about man’s defiant solitude, a lock-jaw, a hammock “with zero-mileage on it”, a wicker chair in a garden, a deckchair that’s been left outside, he sees me standing in the sun, Fermi’s nuclear reactor […] (164-65)

And He sees a lot more: the Mann family, Beethoven, John Coltrane’s long fingers, the speeches of János Kádár, Rudolph II. And so forth. Péter Esterházy in his The Book of Hrabal fuses his protagonists, an anonymous writer from Budapest and his wife Anna with the Czech writer Bohumil Hrabal and World History. The boy Marcel is the son that Anna will bear at the end story. The list seems random. Next to a vague hint at the post-WWII Soviet occupation of Eastern-Central Europe it also allows for other story lines. The deity with an ardent ambition to play the saxophone leads to Julio Cortazar’s story “El Perseguidor” which pays tribute to the “God” of jazz, Charlie Parker. The deity and his angels are perhaps taken from Wim Wenders’ farewell to the Berlin of the 1980s in Der Himmel über Berlin. Somewhat malicious readers might detect in this novel, first published in 1990, the blessings
of a freshly introduced market economy where an abundance of supply from world literature may have overwhelmed the demand. As a novel that attempts to establish a dialogue with the Czech Hrabal and that from the perspective of Ulm, near the sources of the Danube, it is both a coda to the pre-1989 era and a prelude to Esterházy’s own *Down the Danube.* Much more than the latter novel however, it takes dialogue literally: it incorporates the figure of Hrabal into its text and allows its Hungarian protagonists to engage in correspondence with the Czech writer.

Esterházy, more than any other writer of the Central European discourse community, attempted to establish a common, regional discourse. Whereas Esterházy’s encounter with Kiš, both in his necrology and in his subsequent Danube-novel, resulted in smooth texture, a style of intertextuality where the quoted text is seamlessly embedded into the new text, the encounter with Hrabal is marked by ruptures and tension. Whether it played a role in this that Esterházy and Kiš shared Hungarian as a common language, is a matter of speculation. In any case, the encounter with Hrabal takes place under the sign of a Babel legend, where the tower is in Ulm and the linguistic confusion is Central European: Esterházy seeks to establish dialogue in his national language with Hrabal who writes in Czech. The encounter takes place in the absence of a lingua franca, and this is underlined by repeated references to the work and figure of Franz Kafka.

In an interview with Marianna Birnbaum published in *Cross Currents,* Esterházy mentions an encounter with Hrabal in Prague. Here too we have a textual and a real life encounter. The latter took place “in the company of mutual acquaintances […] a prearranged meeting in a Prague pub” (Birnbaum 166). The initial contact is awkward: “When László Szigeti wanted to show him [Hrabal] the Czech translation of my story ‘Want to see golden Budapest?’ he threw it back as if it were shit. ‘I have no glasses with me,’ he screamed… Nevertheless, we gulped down a couple pints of beer” (Birnbaum, 166). The conversation switches to the topic of translation and Hrabal changes his attitude. Esterházy approaches Hrabal by referring to Kafka, telling how “it is a hopeless task to translate Kafka’s sentences because ‘the menacing’ is built into the word order” (166).

Agreement on untranslatability thus creates mutual understanding; and when Esterházy admits that Hrabal’s portrait has been on his desk for a year already, Hrabal begins to “grumble amiably”. When Esterházy reads the three pages from his novel *The Book of Hrabal* that are in Czech, Hrabal “utters the most outrageous words of praise” (167). Whether Hrabal was actually as impressed as Esterházy’s rendering implies, is unclear. There is no record whatsoever of the encounter in Hrabal’s work. Hrabal was somewhat of a celebrity in those days and Esterházy faced severe competition from other guests in Hrabal’s *Stammlokale:* a well known photograph shows him flanked by presidents Václav Havel and Bill Clinton.

Hrabal’s reaction is not that important: what concerns me here is how Esterházy’s novel rewrites Kafka, and through this rewriting “contacts” Hrabal. Hrabal’s own engagement with the work of Kafka is intense but problematic: he often mentions his fellow townsman but quotes him only superficially. The Dr. Hrabal in his fictionalized autobiography identifies, as we saw, with Czech-German bilingualism and especially with Prague German. The narrative travesty of this autobiography suggest, however, that the reworking of the bilingual heritage was painful. Literal identification with Kafka occurs in Hrabal’s dream-like story “Kafkarna”, where the first person’s identity hovers between Hrabal and Kafka. Kinship is also sought in a prose poem Hrabal dedicated to the memory of Franz Kafka, “Adagio Lamentoso” written in 1976 as a post scriptum to the novella *Příliš Hlučná Samota* (Too Loud a Solitude). The relation to Kafka is rather obscure here in this text that evokes the grimness of post-1968 Prague. The speaking voice addresses a woman figure. The poem is highly erotic and echoes Hrabal’s other references to the Prague brothels Kafka frequented. This eroticism fuses with
the humanist belief that literature is the instrument par excellence of cultural survival: “the future of mankind is a bookstore” (“budoucnost lidstva je knihkupectví” 87).

Precisely this combination of male sexuality and humanist mission preoccupies Esterházy in his literary game with the figure and the work of Hrabal. The title, The Book of Hrabal, indicates this doubleness: the book is about Hrabal, but is it also his book in the sense of classical authorship (a notion that Esterházy’s abundant use of foreign texts challenges)? Or is it rather a book by the woman behind the writer, as Hrabal’s own Libeň-trilogy is largely “Pipsi’s Book”? The writer in The Book of Hrabal is commissioned to write about Hrabal, but remains mostly mute whereas his wife writes secret love letters to her husband’s subject.

In the interview with Marianna Birnbbaum Esterházy revealed his method. He took from the Kafka-Milena correspondence “the Czech inclusions, because Milena wrote in Czech and when Kafka referred to some of her statements he of course wrote in Czech. And I have used those. It was rather exciting because not even I knew, while writing, how it would all end” (166). In the end, Esterházy took altogether 33 of the Czech inclusions from the Kafka-Milena letters. In 2/3 of the cases Kafka quotes Milena’s words; in other cases he quotes a nurse diagnosing his tuberculosis, or a friend; sometimes, Kafka himself writes a line in Czech. Kafka’s sensitive eye scrutinizes Milena’s words, it seeks their connotations and what Milena may have meant.

As Milena’s letters to Kafka are lost, we do not know how she responded to this. Esterházy stresses Milena’s part in the correspondence, but does not emancipate Milena’s language from Kafka’s. He simply tears the phrases out of their context and starts to play with them, using characters of his novel as actors. To the literal quotations he adds a narrative text in Hungarian, which translates the Czech, rephrasing the original in third- instead of first-person. The Hungarian gives a popular tone to the Czech quotes and adds the responses of the two characters – The Lord and Hrabal – who speak the Czech phrases. The actors are unsure about their part in the dialogue:

THE LORD: Pane doktore, s Vámi to dlouho nepotrvává, i.e., you can’t last much longer, doktore.

HRABAL: Já jsem ten, který plati, i.e., he’s the one who will have to pay up, on his face reelni hruza, real terror.

THE LORD: We got your text mixed up. It’s you, sir, who should be saying, I won’t last much longer, at which I, reelni hruza, and pay up! (162)

The resulting nonsense dialogue can still be said to conform to the aesthetics of Hrabal, who was fond of ready-mades and accidental texts, like the hero in Too Loud a Solitude who rejoices in the creations of the press that recycles waste paper and produces collages of old and censored books. But the two figures who perform the dialogue have their whole life as narrative characters behind them. The Lord has been instrumental in the plot from the very outset of the story; Hrabal has been passive, a subject of all the other characters who write about him or to him. The dialogue is the only passage where Hrabal is made to speak. As in the real encounter of Esterházy with Hrabal, Kafka stimulates the dialogue.

The text embeds Milena’s phrases in a highly ambiguous narrative that plays with the possibility of autobiography. The novel as a whole is an attempt to communicate with Hrabal and therefore also flirts with offering a biography. The contrast with Hrabal’s fictionalizing technique in the Libeň-trilogy where his wife’s consciousness is laid bare from the first to the last page, is then the central irony of Esterházy’s play with both authors. This question, who can represent whose consciousness? is closely related to the issue of sex and nationality; male
authors enter the consciousness of their wives, and one national language enters the other. Where are the borderlines here? Who watches from which locus?

Esterházy’s *The Book of Hrabal* is narrated by an anonymous internal narrator who enters through the agency of several characters into a dialogue with Hrabal’s texts concerned with the theme of the author and his family. The family as a frame shapes the experience of history, both temporally by means of generations, and sexually by means of gender. The history is recent: in 1989, when Bohumil Hrabal is seventy-five years old, a writer in Budapest is commissioned to write an essay on him. But the novel’s principal character is the writer’s wife, Anna, who tells the histories of her family and that of her husband. What emerges is a balancing of individuals’ experiences and traumas. Which were worse, the German or the Soviet camps? Which invasion was more cruel, more unjust, that of Budapest in 1956 or that of Prague in 1968? Who suffered more, I or you? Answers to these questions are complicated by their narrative context. Anna does not pose the questions what stories are, what history is, and how one should cope with the problem that “to see a story, and to be in that story, is a contradiction”. History with a capital H is the business of males – like her husband, the writer; Anna and her Bohumil, with whom she falls in love, would “make the Danube Confederation of States a reality”, but her husband “would never notice; he’d be tickled pink that the problem of the small nations had been solved” (102).

The deity identified as The Lord is the principal character to cope with these philosophical questions. Anna lives through history and the Lord observes her, for he, ironically, needs a mortal’s experience in order to grasp a world he has himself created. The question as to the nature of history is posed only at the end of the novel, and the immediate cause is rather banal. Out of sympathy for Anna, the Lord feels the urge to play her the saxophone, but he is said to be an epic creature and has no idea whatsoever about timing. And timing, it becomes clear, is again crucial for the understanding of history. God’s final blast on the saxophone, after a short course taught by Charlie Parker, which concludes the novel, is preceded by the previously discussed three-page dialogue between The Lord and Hrabal based on the Kafka-Milena letters.

Milena’s discourse is the third female discourse in the intertextual dialogue of Esterházy’s novel and Hrabal’s family texts. The first is Pipsi’s in Hrabal’s trilogy, the second is the second chapter of *The Book of Hrabal*, entitled “A chapter of unfaithfulness”, which consists in fact of Anna’s love letter to Hrabal. What these three female discourses have in common is the role of the wife behind the “great writer”, a theme that is interconnected in Esterházy’s novel with Hrabal’s peculiar narrative device in the Liběn-trilogy. What Dorrit Cohn has called the transparency of the fictional mind (the narrator’s ability to present a character’s consciousness) was the hidden means by which Hrabal fictionalized his autobiography. Hrabal’s narrator was identified as the author’s wife; she again behaved like a true autobiographer and had no access to the consciousness of the other characters. Where does Pipsi’s ironical depiction of Hrabal as character leaves Pipsi herself? Doesn’t she, a fictional character caught between her real and fictional husband, confirm rather than ironize the God-like writer?

The narrative structure of Esterházy’s *The Book of Hrabal* addresses this second question and is one of the novel’s entries into the work of Hrabal. Esterházy’s novel has three basic plots. The first, the story of Anna, is generically ambivalent: in the course of the novel, it becomes clear that Anna’s husband, the writer might be the same person as the author Esterházy. This mirrors Hrabal’s trilogy, but not exactly: with the exception of Anna’s love letter, Anna is a third-person fictional character - and treated as such by the anonymous first-person narrator. The second level is fantastic as well as fictional for depicting The Lord and two angels. But Anna and her husband deduce from the license plate on the angels’ Lada that they are members of the ÁVO, the communist Hungarian secret police. The third dimension is
represented by the anonymous first-person narrator, who becomes a character at the end of the novel. He may be Anna’s husband, the writer who is commissioned to write about Hrabal and remains mute throughout the novel.

In the final scene, when The Lord oversees the tower of Ulm and the landscape of the novel, he spots the I ascending the tower, and he also spots the writer: “He saw the writer, he saw Anna and the sentence that except for him no one saw, which contained the words writer and Anna, and he saw himself” (166). Meanwhile the I is waving at the Lord, trying to get his attention: “One last glance at our favourite Ulm, hey, there I am! There! There! At the top of the tower, dizzy, I lean against the wall, the strong gusts of wind beating against my hair […]” (166). The I may be the writer, Anna’s husband. The writer is on several occasions identified as an heir of the Esterházy family. Not directly, however. But there is reference to Joseph Haydn, who was in the service of the Esterházy family, and to the family’s fate, rich before the war, expropriated after the war. The father, Anna’s father-in-law, “the prince” (36) is detained and when he is released “he’ll trample home in the heavy night, covered with dust, his son will be waiting for him at the gate, a whining two-year old towhead whose name, for Anna, is the most precious among all men’s names” (37). A name, we may add on the basis of our discussion in chapter two, that is “too well known to be mentioned”. Anna watches her husband sleep at night and we watch over her shoulder: “He is sleeping next to me, happy; I love to be in bed with him, my husband. He looks contented, tired, exhausted from work, like an animal. I look at his face, spent, wasted, I look at the deep furrows on his brow, his beehive head of hair, he is calm, he is sleeping calmly. And I am restless” (134). The “beehive head of hair” obviously plays with the looks of the author, Esterházy. But here, as in the subsequent Danube novel, the autobiographical pact is never confirmed by the proper name. In the Danube novel, the I will say: “I could say, I am Madame Bovary, I could say, calling for attention, P.E. – c’est moi, or I could say, this I is not a fictitious character, but the novelist, an erudite, bitter, disappointed man” (138-39). The Lord precedes the anonymous I in the Danube novel: “Any creature can say Ego, but only God can say sum – I Am,’ said the Lord, casting his moody eyes upon the writer from a great distance” (64).

Who then addresses Hrabal? The Lord, the writer or Anna? The Lord and the writer may be the same figure as the anonymous I, who is the only one not to address Hrabal. Anna writes letters to Hrabal that remain unanswered. To her, there is no difference between Hrabal as a historical person and Hrabal as he appears as either first-person narrator or character in his own texts: she falls in love with the writer on the basis of what she knows from his books. Anna is said to “live the life of a widow of literature”, and part of her initial aversion to her (fourth) pregnancy seems to be related to the inevitable male line of descent and the reduction of her task to mere preserver of the husband’s family name. She resists to the role of the silent other behind the male author. The irony is obvious: a writer keeps silent throughout the story, while The Lord has no understanding of time.

Esterházy’s response to Hrabal’s way of narrating is playful. He parodies Hrabal’s fusion of the male sex with the omniscient fictional eye and the humanist mission of remembering the past through literature. At the same time, if one follows the faint suggestion that Anna’s husband is the author Esterházy, then a narrative hybrid emerges. From this point of view, Anna and her family are hybrid characters, for their minds are accessible to the first-person narrator. Esterházy’s text never treats Hrabal as a fictional character, but his texts are read “diagonally” by Anna. The I, the only character operating at all levels, applies fictional devices to the fictional characters, but factual modes of communication to Hrabal. He seems therefore the main source of ambiguity in the novel. His name is never stated in full, and precisely this indeterminacy allows him to move freely between a factual and a fictional narrative. His fictional detours do lead him, however, into the presence of Hrabal, in the final scene of the novel, when The Lord observes both of them. However ambivalent – the reader is
at a complete loss by now in deciding who watches whom – this final view of a Central European hinterland gives a clue as to where this post-lingua franca of Central Europe might be.

8. And the Lord tore down the Tower of Ulm

Engaged in a Czech-Hungarian dialogue that explicitly excludes Kafka’s German but is watched by The Lord, Esterházy’s The Book of Hrabal leads us in the midst of a Central European rewriting of the Babel legend that may already be post-Central European. Let’s recapitulate. First we contrasted the stance of the national community and the Central Europeans: the former usually highlights that part of the Babel legend that describes the establishment of one’s own tongue, or, in the words of Genesis, of “making a name for ourselves”; the latter identified with the loss of the common language and therefore with the second part of the Babel legend, according to which God created linguistic confusion and dispersed the nations over the face of the earth. Two pre-WWII writers, Kafka and Krleža, illustrated that individual cases may be more complex. Kafka in his speech on the Yiddish language provoked his audience of assimilated Jews, reminding them of the nomadic past they can relive in the Yiddish language. But Kafka himself did not become a linguistic nomad. He wrote in German, the language of the settlers, and in the actual presence of Czech, Yiddish and Hebrew. His was an intermediate position between the two parts of the Babel legend, a constant hovering between the nomad and the sedentary. Krleža felt uneasy about the national Croatian language. Of course, unlike the German of the Prague Jews, the language of the Croats was self-fashioned. It was a product of cultural and political emancipation. Krleža took refuge in one of the older dialects, but only temporarily: he wrote literary texts in it but never fully accepted it. So he too wrote while remembering an older dialect by means of which he challenged the national language and its triumphant account of its own settlement. In his case, the uneasiness about this intermediate position evolved into a specific fictional narrative form, in which none of the voices is authentic and in which a central, organizing narrator appears only as mere suggestion.

Hrabal writes in the linguistic situation after the destruction of the Jewish and Germanophone culture in Central Europe. The national positions survived as Pipsi’s Sudetengeerman stance and Hrabal’s Czech stance shows in the Liben-trilogy. The two stances clash, both claim kinship with the third party which has disappeared. Before the war, this third party was on the margins, after the war it is in the center of linguistic consciousness, but as a void, a memory of loss and guilt. From now on, any regional dialogue takes place between national languages, without mediation of the third party.

Esterházy’s novel transgresses the post-WWII era and leads into the year 1989. The past is complicated, painful, a continuous source of conflict and of Familienunglück (family disasters, Kiš after Heine). The present is amorphous and the future is uncertain. The vision from the Ulm tower suggests that one can map the present as Central Europe and the lives of its inhabitants as Central European biographies. But each mapping that writes itself into the Central European tradition, faces the absence of a lingua franca, and therefore confusions and misunderstandings that are local and historical. Local means that one draws on the experiences of a past and lost bilingualism; historical means that this local experience is cumulative. The lingua franca of German had its own ways of seeking for meaning (Kafka scrutinizing Milena’s phrases) and the national languages were from the individual point of view far less powerful instruments of literary communication than the advocates of national reawakening imagined it to be (Krleža’s discontent). More recently there is post-lingua franca writing that confronts the limitations of the national languages. What remains is the memory
of a shared language, and the proponents of Central Europe located their sense of community, of “shared tone and sensibility” in this memory. When Esterházy puts this metaphorical lingua franca to the test, its nostalgia becomes immediately apparent. But one also comes to understand the need to communicate one’s own past, even if this is a history of misunderstanding.

Esterházy’s *The Book of Hrabal* creates a new lingua franca by letting understanding and misunderstanding interact. The novels shows that like the memory of multilingualism, the genre of fictionalized autobiography is extremely sensitive to its own generic history. It crosses national borders and so becomes a regional genre; and it celebrates as much the possibilities of fiction as it is aware of the limitations of facts. To fictionalize means here to detach other voices, viewpoints and perspectives from that of the autobiographer. Its representation of the autobiographer’s life is therefore intersubjective - some of the subjects who focalize are factual, other fictional; sometimes the distinction cannot be maintained, when the narrative means are blurred beyond classification.

The discourse on Central Europe was intersubjective in a similar way. There too, one crossed national and linguistic boundaries in order to see the similarities between one’s own and someone else’s experience. What distinguishes the genre of fictionalized autobiography and the lives it presents, from the Central European discourse, is its constant awareness and use of, and play with genre. In short, when the Central European discourse claims it crosses national borders, it expresses an intention. Fictionalized autobiography is located at the border and always speaks from a borderland.

A last example. Both Péter Esterházy and Claudio Magris in his travelogue *Danubio* travel the Danube landscape; both explore the idea of Central Europe and contemplate whether there is a common history. Both also climb towers. We have seen Esterházy ascending the Ulm tower but we did not know whom we were following as we ascended, nor did we know whom we watched from the ensuing bird’s eye perspective. How different in kind is Magris’ climbing. In Sighişoara (Schässburg/Segesvár), Transylvania (part of Magris’ “Pannonia”, the section title of his travelogue), Magris climbs the local tower “Torre dell’Orologio” (338). From within the tower, from within the very clockwork, he contemplates:

> From this observatory, life seems just a waste of time [...] Conviction, inner peace, resistance against the general mobilization of everyday life, is love for something else, something more than life, something that emerges only during the break, during intermissions, when the mechanisms take a rest, when the government and the world are on vacation in the literal sense of *vacare*, being empty, absent, when only the high and strong light of summer exists. (340)

Magris expresses his longing after having traveled more than 300 pages along the Danube. At this point one can understand and even sympathize with his craving for a “vacation” from history. But if we read his passage with Esterházy’s parody in mind, his intention slightly changes: Esterházy’s rewriting reminds us that Magris speaks like a traveler in a travelogue. It also reminds us that Magris speaks from within the Italian, though as a Germanist he also focalizes via the German language. In contrast to the endemic Central European gaze, his is a fresh look at the region: his sees history though his speech is not burdened with it. But his wish for a place from which one can speak independently, which echoes György Konrád’s longing for a political locus amoenus, produces a counter-effect. This wish, beside literary and philosophical, is also deeply political: Magris gives in fact a rather utopian resumé of the Central European project. His wish is to transcend his - spatial, political, historical and linguistic – perspective and to reach a supranational perspective. I am not sure that he
succeeds. Esterházy’s climbing, on the other hand, departs from a narrative that is so blurred when it comes to genre, so deeply drenched in the multilingual memory from the region that when the I reaches the top it no longer matters whether his perspective fulfills this wish for objectivity. The reader has shared from the very outset Esterházy’s multi-focal perspective.
5. Post-scriptum: a genre to be continued

This thesis could not be concluded without mentioning two literary events of the year 2002. First the “Esterházy affair” (which I put in quotation marks because I am not sure whether it is an affair or just a case); then the Noble prize for literature for Imre Kertész. The first event shows how deeply drenched the genre of fictionalized autobiography is in its context, the literary culture in which the genre is written and received. The second brings up, once more, the role and the meaning of the Central European discourse community as a historically determined effort at cultural self-definition. Kertész is a different kind of writer than Esterházy. He was neither a “member” of the community, nor does he apply the toponym “Central Europe”. Instead, in a recent essay, he refers to “Central and Eastern Europe”. But in the same text he lists as his themes the very concerns that were at the core of the discussion on Central Europe.

I have mentioned the Sarajevo-born, now Anglophone Aleksandar Hemon and his The Question of Bruno (2000) as an example of fictionalized autobiography’s continuity. Hemon pays tribute to Danilo Kiš. Abundant intertextual allusions and themes - especially homelessness - leave no doubt about this. Even more explicit in its borrowing from Kiš’s texts is Esterházy’s Harmonia Caelestis (2000). In chapter two I described how Esterházy appropriated Kiš’s story “It is glorious to die for the fatherland”, presenting it as motivated by his (quasi?) naïve conception of literature as play: “[Esterházy’s bracket] have this childish, romantic conception of literature, of a world where there are only books and texts which speak to each other, discuss, help another, dwell together and relate to one another” (172). Esterházy claims that he found out only later what high a price Kiš paid for using appropriating texts by others and blurring factual and fictional narration in A Tomb for Boris Davidović. Now Harmonia Caelestis has caused its own stir.

Péter Esterházy’s membership of the Central European discourse community was reluctant and at an ironical distance. The two novels I discuss in this thesis, Down the Danube and The Book of Hrabal, provide a kind of post scriptum to the Central-European discourse community. By blurring factual and fictional narrative identities, they continued the genre of fictionalized autobiography. Harmonia Caelestis, published in Hungary in 2000, was to be the author’s magnum opus. The first part of the novel is very much constructed in the way Esterházy borrowed Kiš’s story: set in the first person, countless Esterházy sons tell the stories of countless fathers. Altogether 371 entries begin with “My father...”, mounting up to the history of the Esterháyzys. Kiš’s story is one of these entries. The second part of the novel, the history of an Esterházy - the author’s father? - is an almost linear story about the communist expropriation of the family after WWII and how this affected their lives.

Soon after the novel was published, unknown documents about the author’s father were discovered in the archives of the secret police. It turned out that Esterházy’s father had worked for over twenty years as an informant for the Hungarian secret police, providing them dutifully with information about the former Hungarian aristocracy and much more. The discovery prompted Esterházy to write a sequel, Revised Edition - Supplement to Harmonia Caelestis. The revised edition presents the father’s reports to the secret police in red ink. It also gives Esterházy’s response to them. The critics hastened to give their version of the affair. According to some, the discovery was another symptom of Hungary’s troubled history, which had now forced Esterházy to revise completely his story of the past. According to others, it was a set-up to which the author, it was assumed, was an accomplice: commercial motives had prompted him to present a cleansed version of his father’s story, only to “discover” incriminating material after publication; the public would be lured into buying the revised edition as well.
One is reminded of the closing scene of Kosztolányi’s *Anna Edes* (see chapter three): if one cannot be sure whether the author intended well or meant evil, than sure thing he just swims with the tide and trims his sails to the wind.

Whatever Esterházy’s intentions may have been, his fictionalized autobiography counters these accusations. If it is true that Esterházy truly did not know about his father’s role while writing *Harmonia Caelestis* (one would have to take his word for that), then the *Revised Edition* shows at least this: that he not only had to revise his fictionalized family history, but also his playful, ironic attitude toward history. Esterházy always loved to manipulate history by means of literary play; now the reverse seems to have happened.

To Imre Kertész, there is nothing playful about the concerns that motivated the discourse on Central Europe. As a given historical context, he regards these as the ontological parameters of his writing. Kiš sometimes spoke of the fate of being Central European. Kertész would probably agree. In an essay entitled “The freedom of self-definition”, published in The Guardian on the occasion of Kertész’s Noble prize, Kertész explores the space that a writer from central and eastern Europe (his term) enjoys when he does not wish to confine himself to the traditions and themes as defined by the national tradition - in his case, the Hungarian one. His opening statement is a declaration of the political right of self-definition, “which entails the simple notion that each and every member of society has the right to be what he or she is.” In the remainder of the essay, the reader’s expectations are disappointed. The essay is not about freedom, but about the limits of freedom. It discusses the difficulties and perils of literary self-definition.

According to Kertész, the historical bearer of the freedom of self-definition was Germanophone culture in multinational and multilingual areas. Writers like Paul Celan, Franz Kafka and Joseph Roth, by writing in German, “secured their intellectual independence and [...] their freedom of self-definition.” The ensuing historical experiences, from pre-WWII endemic nationalism and its anti-Semitism, the Jewish holocaust and the post-WWII communist system, reduced the freedom of self-definition to a minimum: “In 1944, they put a yellow star on me, which in a symbolic sense is still there; to this day I have not been able to remove it.” Kertész’s identity is not the product of self-definition. Society, which is unable to cope with its own national traumas, imposed its image upon him. The result of the imprisonment is “a painful state of mind”. Kertész describes his alienation as follows: one either gets the impression that the surrounding world is intangible, or that one has become foreign to oneself. Either way, lack of freedom alienates the self.

Indeed, Kertész’s writer has not many options. Political discrimination tempts him to adapt to his inhuman surroundings by proving his own humanity. But proving one’s humanity in an inhuman society means adapting to racist categories. To Kertész, this is “pathetic” because one only deludes oneself: “In a racist environment, a Jew cannot be human”. The writer is, however, not completely helpless. Literature, or more precisely, the act of writing, presents him with the possibility of choice:

My becoming a writer was the result of a conscious decision, but I was born a Jew. In order for my writer self and my Jewish self to come together and form a single attribute, I have to view my Jewishness the way I do the planned execution of a literary work: a task to be completed; a decision in favor of total existence or total self-denial [...] In the end, the fact that I am a Jew is the result of a decision; having made it, not only will I not be plunged into a so-called identity crisis, but a sharper light will also be cast on my entire existence.

This is the option the writer has: to take the initiative and to face the forces that seek to define him by imposing their own image. Writing thus becomes the battleground for one’s identity.
Literature in Kertész’s view, provides a genre of self-definition that enables the writer to establish his intellectual and emotional independence. It would be too far-fetched to read in Kertész’s reflections a plea for literature as a refuge. Writing for Kertész is a thoroughly social act. In this act, the outcome of the powerplay between the author’s voice and the voices of society is insecure. Kertész’s author responds to society and its uses of history. He cannot influence, let alone reverse history. But one can say that for Kertész, literature is a means of self-definition that differs from other ways of self-definition. Before Kertész, Danilo Kiš referred to literary form as literature’s *differentia specifica* as opposed to other genres of self-definition. For him, “literary form” was the quintessential Central European value: “it is everything and nothing.”

I paraphrase Kertész’s essay in extenso because it brings up most of the concerns that motivated the Central European discourse. Alienation, the limits of freedom, writing in a linguistic vacuum after the destruction of multilingual culture, literary writing as a means to formulate one’s individual identity, writing as a means to escape all too rigid conceptions of identity. All these were concerns that contributed to the rise of the idea about a Central European culture. The term may have weakened or disappeared altogether, the need to deal with these realities in literature still exists.
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Summary in Dutch

Deze dissertatie behandelt een groep schrijvers uit Oost-Centraal Europa die zichzelf in de jaren tachtig van de twintigste eeuw presenteerden als “Centraal-Europeanen”. De dissertatie behandelt voorts literaire teksten van deze schrijvers waarin zij autobiografie en fictie vermengden tot zgn. “gefictionaliseerde autobiografieën”. De aanleiding om deze auteurs, uit diverse talen en tradities afkomstig, bij elkaar te brengen, was tweeledig. Naast het epitheton “Centraal Europeaan” zijn er de nieuwe intertextuele banden tussen hun gefictionaliseerde autobiografieën. De teksten citeren elkaar, en refereren aan elkaar en deels ook aan een aantal “pre-teksten”, meestal modernistische teksten die zij als hun voorlopers bestempelden.


Hoofdstuk 1 beschrijft de Centraal-Europese discourse gemeenschap als een veelstemmig geheel. Milan Kundera, die zich na het publiceren van zijn geruchtmakende artikel spoedig uit de discussie terugtrok, verstand onder de “tragedie” van Centraal-Europa het historische gegeven dat na Yalta, de verdeling van Europa in 1945 door de geallieerden, een essentieel deel van de Europese cultuur in het oosten terecht was gekomen, onder Sovjet-bezetting. Midden-Europa, betoogde hij, hoorde thuis in het westen. Czeslaw Milosz verfijnde deze stelling door te wijzen op de unieke (en bittere) historische ervaring van de volkeren en culturen tussen de Duits- en Russisch-talige gebieden. Enerzijds was er de dubbele ervaring van totalitarisme (de Nazi-bezetting, en later de Sovjet-bezetting), anderzijds was er de dreiging, van binnenuit, van nationalisme. Het resultaat was, volgens Milosz, een specifieke vorm van individualisme, gekleurd door een sterk ironisch besef van geschiedenis.

Hoofdstuk 1 laat zien dat het laatste punt, het endemiche nationalisme, een minstens zo sterke drijfveer van de discourse gemeenschap is geweest als de verbittering over de oost-west verdeling (gesymboliseerd in de toponiem “Oost-Europa”). Voor György Konrád, en vooral voor Danilo Kiš, was Centraal-Europa een alternatief voor het nationalisme. Niet toevallig speelt ballingschap een rol in de biografieën van veel van de protagonisten van de discourse gemeenschap. Het was een hechte gemeenschap die zichzelf als een familie zag. Meer nog dan in een historische behoefte, voorzag de discourse gemeenschap in een existentiële behoefte: het verschafte de leden een alternatief thuis.

Het tweede deel van hoofdstuk 1 leest in detail de evolutie van het idee over Centraal-Europa in het werk van Czeslaw Milosz en Danilo Kiš. Milosz was al in de vroege jaren vijftig in ballingschap gegaan. Zijn autobiografische geschriften en polemiek, hoewel zij in die tijd nog spraken van “Oost-Europa”, zijn het beginpunt van een intellectuele zoektocht naar een alternatieve cultuurhistorische ruimte voor zijn eigen levensloop. Milosz groeide op in Vilnius, Litouwen, en schreef in het Pools. Hij verwierp al vroeg het nationalisme; zoekend naar een vorm van internationalisme verwierp hij ook het communisme. Geleidelijk groeit in zijn werk het besef van een “grensidentiteit”: een identiteit die nergens thuis hoort en toch doortrokken is van een sterk besef van eigenheid, van lokaliteit. Het was deze zoektocht,


Dit fenomeen is, formeel gezien, zeker niet beperkt tot de Oost-Centraal-European regio. Wat het tot een genre maakt is de intertextualiteit, en de nauwe verbondenheid van de levenslopen in de teksten met de levenslopen van de auteurs, die alle getekend zijn door vervolging, vernietiging (en innerlijke) ballingschap. In dit opzicht is het werk van Witold Gombrowicz een belangrijke voorlader van deze schrijfwijze. In zijn Dagboek overschrijdt hij voortdurend de grenzen van het dagboekgenre, en zijn roman De Pornografie (1960) presenteert een ik-verteller onder de naam “Witold Gombrowicz” in het door de Nazi’s bezette Polen, terwijl de auteur in die tijd al in zijn Argentijnse ballingschap verbleef. Milosz heeft uitgebreid gereageerd op het werk van Gombrowicz, onder andere op diens spel met de figuur van de auteur in autobiografie en in fictie. Milosz voelde onbehagen en betwijfelde of het meer was dan een clownske truc. Vergelijkbare reserves met deze vertelwijze heeft de ik-verteller in Péter Esterházy’s Donau Stroomaflaarts (1991). De paradox is hier dat de verteller zijn bedenkingen heeft over het gebruik van de initialen van de auteur, maar zij intussen toch zelf gebruikt - met de nodige ironie: “P.E., c’est moi.”

UITGAAANDEE VAN HET WERK VAN PHILIPPE LEJEUVE EN DORRIT COHN heb ik in hoofdstuk 2 getracht te beschrijven hoe het genre de lezer aanzet tot een tegenstrijdige leeswijze. Op grond van identieke eigennamen van auteur en verteller sluiten lezer en auteur een autobiografisch pact; de beschreven belevenissen worden daarmee narratieve weergaven van gebeurtenissen uit de historische werkelijkheid. Wanneer auteur en verteller verschillende namen hebben, sluiten lezer en auteur een fictioneel pact: de verteller en de personages behoren tot een fictionale wereld, die niet per sé historisch is. Gefictionaliseerde autobiografie biedt een zgn. contradictoir pact: het is voor de lezer uiteindelijk onmogelijk om uit te maken of hij met fictie of autobiografie heeft te maken. Milosz’ onbehagen bij het lezen van Gombrowicz stemt voort uit zo’n contradictoir pact. Hoofdstuk 2 beschrijft ook een geval waarin een vergelijkbare vorm van vermenging van feit en fictie een heuse rel veroorzaakte: Danilo Kiš’s Een Grafmonument voor Boris Davidović (1975). Ik betoog hier dat de inventieve, genre-doorbrekende vorm van dit werk bijdroeg aan de aanstoot die de criticiteit aan het werk namen. De affaire, die leidde tot het vertrek van Kiš uit
Belgrado, raakt weer aan het hart van het Centraal-Europese discours: het verwerpen van nationalism en de zoektocht naar een supranationaal literair en cultureel model.


Gefictionaliseerde autobiografie is niet alleen in verteltechnisch opzicht een grensoverschrijdend genre. De levens die het presenteeert spelen zich af in de marges van de grote geschiedenis. Hoofdstuk 3 gaat over zo’n tussenruimte tussen de nationale literaturen: de imaginaire-historische ruimte Pannonia, onderdeel van het Donaustroomgebied en historisch grensland van het Habsburgse rijk. Pannonia is bepalend voor de topografie van Danilo Kiš’ familietriologie. Het is het setting waarin de holocaust van de imaginaire-historische vaderfiguur wordt geplaatst. Het hoofdstuk traceert de geschiedenis van de toponiem Pannonia. Ooit de benaming voor één van de Romeinse provincies in Zuidoost-Europa, leidt het tot aan de twintigste eeuw het een zielotgend bestaan. In de jaren twintig begint het een prominente plaats in te nemen in de reisverhalen en de fictie van de Kroatische schrijver Miroslav Krleža. Ik betoog dat Krleža voor Pannonia een dystopie was van de nationale Kroatische ruimte. De laatste achtte hij te eng om het lot van zijn personages in te beschrijven, allen figuren vier levensloop nauw is verweven met het lot van de Habsburgse Dubbelmonarchie. Krleža’s Pannonia is echter geen alternatief voor de nationale ruimte. Het bekritiseert het negentiende eeuwse nationale project in zijn problematische verwezenlijking.

En het is de ruimte waar verschillende nationalismen, vooral het Kroatische en het Hongaarse, in hun felle blindheid met elkaar worden geconfronteerd. Krleža’s roman De Terugkeer van Filip Latinovicz (1932) toont personages met een vaag besef van een Kroatische identiteit, maar vooral doortrokken van een diep onbehagen over nationale afkoms en taal. Krleža’s fictie, betoog ik, maakt echter een belangrijk onderscheid tussen de Heimatslosigkeit van dezefiguren en die van degenen die nooit bij een natie hoorden, joden die hun identiteit vooral ontlenen aan vervolging en uitsluiting. Deze figuren komen aan het woord bij Krleža, maar meestal als partner in dialoog, zoals Egon Blithauer in de roman Banket in Blitwa (1938 en 1962), niet als focaliserend personage.

De roman Banket in Blitwa lees ik als een uitbreiding van de Pannonische ruimte bij Krleža. In deze roman presenteert Krleža bovendien een nauwelijks verhuld portret van de Hongaarse schrijver Dezső Kosztolányi. De intertextuele dialoog tussen de twee schrijvers is van bijzonder belang voor Kiš’ Pannonia: evenals Kosztolányi was de tweetalig Servo-Kroatisch/Hongaarse Kiš afkomstig uit Szabatka/Subotica. Krleža en Kosztolányi hebben elkaar meerdere malen ontkot en zeker één keer grote onenigheid gehad over de rol van Hongarije en Kroatië. Hun confrontatie, en de nationale status quo die daaruit voortvloeide, raakt weer aan de kern van de Centraal-Europese discourse gemeenschap. Voor Kiš was Pannonia in de eerste plaats een literair alternatief voor de nationale tradities. Ik lees in detail de gefictionaliseerde autobiografie Tuin, As (1965). De lezing inventariseert de overeenkomsten tussen Krleža’s en Kiš’ Pannonia: de gemeenschappelijke metaforen. Maar tekenend is vooral het verschil dat Kiš zoekt, de negatieve traditie die hij formuleert. Hij neemt de imaginaire, dystopische ruimte van Krleža over en plaatst hierin de familie Sam. De verteller legt de nadruk op zijn geschiedenis van assimilatie. De figuur van de vader wordt als slachtoffer van de holocaust eerst op de achtergrond gehouden. Allengs wordt hij prominenter en betwist tenslotte de familiegeschiedenis
zoals verteld door de zoon. Het is veelzeggend dat wanneer de vader na jaren terugkeert als “overlevende van Auschwitz”, hij zijn vaderschap ontent en bovendien Duits spreekt. Zijn alternatieve identiteit kan worden verbonden met de biografie van de auteur Kiš. Hoofdstuk 3, naast een literair-historische reconstructie van een traditie, stelt dus een fundamenteel probleem van het Centraal-Europese discours aan de orde: hoe kan cultureel geheugen worden geformuleerd wanneer de voorgangers in de eigen taal (Križa en Kosztolányi voor Kiš) in essentie schreven uit nationaal perspectief?

Hoofdstuk 4 gaat nader in op deze fundamentele kwestie vanuit het perspectief van de meertaligheid. Meertaligheid was een centraal gegeven voor de Centraal-Europese discourse gemeenschap. Niet alleen vanwege de grote linguïstische verscheidenheid van de regio, maar vooral vanwege het talige vacuüm waarin de gemeenschap een geheugen probeerde te formuleren. De gemeenschap claimde een gezamenlijke “toon en gevoeligheid” (Miłosz) te hebben, maar had geen lingua franca tot zijn beschikking. Tegelijk was men zich zerk bewust van de centrale rol die het Duits tot aan WOII in de regio had gespeeld; sterker nog, talloze literaire voorbeelden, die de gemeenschap als zijn voorgangers bestempelde (Musil, Broch von Horváth, Kafka) schreven in het Duits.

Hoofdstuk 4 bespreekt eerst twee sleutelvoorbeelden van vooroorlogse meertaligheid. Het eerste geval is Kafka, vooral diens overpeinzingen over de betekenis van het Jiddisch, dat hem een tijdlang bekoord heeft naast zijn eigen Duits, en natuurlijk het Tsjechisch, dat in de correspondentie met Milena Jesenska een belangrijk thema was. Het tweede geval is Krleža, die uitgebreid heeft geschreven over de meertaligheid van Zagreb, zijn geboorteplaats. Vooral het Kajkavische dialect, dat voortbestond naast de nationale Kroatische standaard, had zijn aandacht. De vergelijking tussen Kafka en Krleža levert een beeld op van een cultuur van meertaligheid waarin uiteindelijk niet één taal aanspraak kan maken op de onvoorwaardelijke voorkeur van de schrijvers. In plaats daarvan brengen alle talen een zekere mate van inauthenticiteit met zich mee. Jiddisch en Kajkavisch hadden voor zulke verschillende schrijvers als Kafka en Krleža een vergelijkbare rol: zij stelden deze “jargons” of “dialecten” voor als veel authentieker dan het Duits resp. het Kroatisch, zonder dat zij deze talen tot hun hoofdtaal maakten.

Vervolgens biedt hoofdstuk 4 een lezing van Hrabals trilogie. Daarin staat het verlies van de Duitstalige cultuur in Praag centraal. Niet alleen van de joodse, maar ook van de etnisch-Duitse cultuur. De vertelster, de echtgenote van “Dr. Hrabal” is een Sudetenduitse en heeft met haar echtgenoot talloze aanvaringen over wie de verantwoordelijkheid voor deze taalvernietiging draagt. De bijzondere vertelvorm legt zowel het problematische bloat van de rol van de dader als die van het slachtoffer. Het hoofdstuk besluit met een bespreking van Esterházy’s roman Het Boek van Hrabal. Deze gefictionaliseerde autobiografie over een schrijver in Boedapest (ommiskenbaar de auteur zelf) die probeert een essay over Hrabal te schrijven, raakt aan het hart van de (on)mogelijkheden van een supranationale dialoog in de afwezigheid van een lingua franca. De Hongaan schrijft over de Tsjech en speelt met de Tsjechische citaten uit de correspondentie tussen Kafka en Milena om een dialoog tot stand te brengen. De roman buit vooral de Babylonische spraakverwarring uit; mijn conclusie is echter dat de affiniteit met de stijl - het gefictionaliseerde autobiografische schrijven - als alternatief kan worden gezien voor de afwezige lingua franca.
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