Fictionalized Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe

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Citation for published version (APA):
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 Kiš 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
German point of view. This is true both for Friedrich Naumann’s political concept as well as for its current use that is cultural-historical, and that often evokes nostalgia for the lost Germanophone culture of the countries eastern of Germany and Austria. As I will show in chapters one and four, the destruction of Germanophone culture is one of the historical traumas with which the Central Europeans tried to come to terms - but from their non-Germanophone perspective. In fact, Hrabal’s trilogy can be read both as a lament for the loss of Germanophone culture, behind which are both the Jewish culture of Prague, and of the language and culture of the Sudetes, ethnic Germans.

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 other 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 acts 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’ *A Tomb for Boris Davidović* (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 counterparts 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 an 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.