Fictionalized Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe
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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 Dostoyevski 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, Czeslaw Milosz 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. Milosz’ 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 Czeslaw Milosz, 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 Jelenski 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 Judeo-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 Czesław Miłosz; 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 Miłosz’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 Miłosz 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 Višegrad 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 Kíš called it at the conference. Konrád would extend the family-metaphor in his necrology for Kíš, 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 Kíš
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 Višehrads-triangle. Incomprehension, it seems, became the rule and lead to agitated reductionism on both sides. It is disappointing to see that Miłosz’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 loses 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. As he 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” (Miłosz, “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” (Miłosz 99). Central European literature is said to have distinguished itself for its “tone and sensibility” (Miłosz 99) and Kiśl 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 Miłosz 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 (Miłosz 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 Kiśl nor Miłosz 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. Miłosz, 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 Miłosz’ constant reference to Russian literature and Kiśl’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 Milosz 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 outdated 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 Anglophone 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 Milosz 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 Milosz 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 Milosz’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 censorshipdevoting 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 apatride 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 conceitedness 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.

Mehmedinović 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 Milosz says about the origin of the nationalist imagination, “humiliated national pride usually gives rise to delusions, to self-pity, 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 choose 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 Ilia 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 qualitate 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 – writing 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 Miłosz’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 Miłosz 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 Rodzinnia Europa adds “Europe” to the “realm of birth” in the English translation. However, the boundaries of Miłosz’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 áme 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, Miłosz 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, Miłosz 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 Miłosz’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 Miroslaš 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, nationalist 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 Kíš 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 Kíš’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 Kíš’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 Kíš’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 Kíš’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 Kíš 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 Kíš’s 1958 Paris travelogue. The difference is the following. In 1958, Kíš 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 Kíš 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.

(110)

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.