Fictionalized Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe

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Chapter 2

Historical and narratological outlines of a genre.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. Fictional or historical lives?

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

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

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

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

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

3. Tools from the narratological box

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

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

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

First person narration lacks definite formal marks of fictionality. Therefore Cohn focuses here on distinguishing the reading of fiction from the reading of non-fiction. Elaborating on Philippe Lejeune’s proposition that readers choose one key or another, that they engage either in a fictional or an autobiographical pact, Cohn takes the proper name of first-person narration as “the principal criterion for differentiating between real and fictional self-narration [...]”, for establishing the ontological status of the speaker – by which I mean his identity or nonidentity with the author in whose name the narrative has been published” (125).

Whether author and narrator carry the same name or not, provides a clue for distinguishing fictional from factual self-narration. Thus Karlo Štajner’s 7000 Days in Siberia asks for a factual reading because the narrator has the name of the author and it is of vital importance that the reader accepts the events as the author’s experiences. Lejeune has, moreover, pointed out that the autobiographical pact is not restricted to first-person narratives. Third-person narration may also enforce an autobiographical pact, provided that the name of the protagonist is identical with that of the author.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

My second observation follows the same line of argument, only from a geographical rather than a historical angle. Although processes of globalization have made it increasingly difficult to speak of separate literary cultures, national and regional differences exist and will continue to exist. This also goes for East-Central Europe. Even if 1989 loosened and redraw many of the political boundaries, this does not mean that the region’s cultures of reception have become identical to those, say in France or the United States. Specific features of these local literary cultures might account for fictionalized autobiography’s specific form. Below, I discuss some of these specific features.
4. Miłosz’s second thoughts on author figures in fiction

Czesław Miłosz, whom fictionalized autobiographer Konrád came to look upon as the father of “the Central European tribe”, praises in his 1986 essay the literature of Central Europe for its “specific tone and sensibility, not to be perceived elsewhere” (99). What works he is referring to remains unclear, however. In *Year of the Hunter* (1994), a diary Miłosz kept during the years 1987-1988, he mentions the Lisbon roundtable, including a list of the participants from East-Central Europe. But there is no record of extensive readings of the works of the Central European authors – no reference to Konrád, to Kiš or to Hrabal. He repeatedly mentions Polish authors, first and foremost Witold Gombrowicz. Gombrowicz died in 1969 and therefore was not around to join the discussion of Central Europe. Born in 1904, he is usually listed among the three great Polish avantgardists - the other two being Stanisław Witkiewicz and Bruno Schulz. Gombrowicz ended up in Argentina in 1939 and stayed there until he left for Europe in 1963. He spent the remaining years of his life in Vence, southern France, and never returned to Poland.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It is, then, this fictional Gombrowicz whom Milosz considers the clown and above which he prefers the Diary’s factual Gombrowicz. Milosz is far from a naïve reader: he seems well aware of Gombrowicz’s diarist tricks and deceit. He goes as far as to admire him for it, although he rejects Gombrowicz’s aesthetics of play with the author figure.

I take Pornography as a model, Cosmos and Transatlantyk are similar in that they are first-person narratives where the narrator has the name of the author, and both too are obvious fantasies. Gombrowicz’s alternative solution to the failure of the (realist) novel to address the
extreme trauma’s of WWII lies in his blurring of factual and fictional narration; in combination with the author figure it leads to a novelistic form that is to Miłosz clownish rather than scandalous or offensive. The clown is a lighter form of playing, the clown cannot ridicule, he cannot give offence to his audience. Therefore, in the eyes of Miłosz, he is inferior to the author-player in the *Diary*.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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