Fictionalized Autobiography and the Idea of Central Europe

Snel, G.J.A.

Citation for published version (APA):

General rights
It is not permitted to download or to forward/distribute the text or part of it without the consent of the author(s) and/or copyright holder(s), other than for strictly personal, individual use, unless the work is under an open content license (like Creative Commons).

Disclaimer/Complaints regulations
If you believe that digital publication of certain material infringes any of your rights or (privacy) interests, please let the Library know, stating your reasons. In case of a legitimate complaint, the Library will make the material inaccessible and/or remove it from the website. Please Ask the Library: https://uba.uva.nl/en/contact, or a letter to: Library of the University of Amsterdam, Secretariat, Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam, The Netherlands. You will be contacted as soon as possible.
5. Post-scriptum: a genre to be continued

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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