Legitimacy and Fluidity: Central European Narratives of Personhood

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This paper will try to approach the issue of 'Contours of Legitimacy in Central Europe' through the prism of and with the tools of literary analysis. I will focus on the genre of Bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, and its development in Central Europe. The genre originates in 18th century, and according to an early but widely repeated definition, it is a novel where a young protagonist "discovers himself and his social role through experience of love, friendship and the hard realities of life" (Wilhelm Dilthey; quoted by Labovitz 1988). I will show that the Central European Bildungsroman is in some aspects quite different from its West European models, and that both in its structure and motifs actually more resembles the formations of Bildungsroman outside Europe, in the so-called post-colonial world.

Theorists of the English and German Bildungsroman associate the genre with initiation into adulthood, as such, as it exists in some form in all cultures, and further, specifically with West-European modernity, with the changed approach towards and demands for coming-of-age in the 18th century; i.e. with the construction of the concept of youth as an apprenticeship. In a Bildungsroman the protagonist negotiates his/her (more often his) way in relation to modern society, resolving in some form the basic modern oppositions between change and tradition, and between individual and system. The typical sujet would be that a young individual leaves home, frequently with a conflict between generations involved; he goes into the wider world, often travels from province to metropole, there he experiences and learns a lot, develops and matures as an individual, and is then reconciled with society, or at least consolidates his attitude towards it. At the end he goes back home to show that he has done well and is recognised as adult member of society with legitimate agency (Nyatetu-Waigwa 1996). The traditional Bildungsroman's poetics is teleological and historicist in the sense that whatever happens serves the final good and wholesome self-fulfillment of the protagonist - his rational progress in the world (Swales 1978). Goethe's Wilhelm Meister is the classical example, as well as Great Expectations or Jane Eyre in English literature. The negative variations of this Grand Narrative of Enlightenment and Romanticism - e.g. a social mobility novel where the protagonist develops a critical attitude towards the system he has climbed -, still follow the same structure of progressive development and maturation.

Central Europe's relation to modernity and the narrative of Progress has been a far more troubled one (Schöpflin 2001). The difference between Western Europe
and Central Europe - and most of the rest of the world -, where modernity was imported or superimposed by varying degrees of force, is that in Western Europe the Enlightenment metaphysics became the metaphysics, the 'normal and natural' way to interpret the world and human history in it. It thus provides a relatively predictable world, even in conditions of rapid change, as one could rely on a firm sense of self and belief in its rational agency. In many other places in the non-West where collective knowledge, moral expectations and the relationship between individual and collectivity were different from the West, the arrival of this metaphysics was alien and dislocating. Non-Western elites have been engaged in a continuous endeavour to secure their own sense of self and to construct their own indigenous models of modernity. Thus it is not surprising that the Bildungsroman as a generic model has been profoundly popular outside Western Europe, while its poetics generally differs from its West-European counterpart.

I will start with a Bildungs poem by Czeslaw Milosz, as it introduces in a condensed form several of the key motifs, which the novels deal with in a ramified manner and bring to various different kinds of resolutions.

This is the quintessential Bildungsroman story of a young man leaving the periphery and going to the metropole, dazzling as a perfect ideal of universal modernity. In this case, however, it is not just a journey to metropole, it is a journey to a foreign metropole. The foreignness of the universality is not easy to ignore, the empowering 'necessary illusion' - that becoming an adult in modern society is in some sense a coherent journey - is lacking. Adapting to the alien world is thus not projected as growth in terms of one's previously adopted values (a 'bettering oneself'); it is not an evolution but a total caesura, or a revolution. At that point one cannot possibly return to one's home and one's father as a legitimate reformer. If one is to return as an agent of change one must come back as a revolutionary - note the metonymic symbolism of the geographical names in the poem.

As it is, the final part of the poem proclaims disillusionment with the universalist project - with the idea that there is 'a capital of the world', one single place where modernity, maturity and full personhood can be reached. It counterposes a different world-view - understanding of the world as one of multiple centres of moral worth. At that Paris itself is particularised, seen not as a capital of universalism but as a rather self-absorbed place of baguettes and lemons. Yet, the recovery of the 'natural world-order' is thoroughly tainted by the sense of guilt and loss condensed in the motif of the killed water-snake. The bitterness of the poem goes far beyond disappointment in French ideas. The sacralised axiology of the protagonist's home culture has been violated and he finds himself in a broken world.

If the West-European Bildungsroman 'uncovers' or constructs the concealed order or wholeness of life, the Central European one registers a journey towards
such an order (quite often perceived as existing 'elsewhere', like in Paris), but then with a second move restates scepticism about the existence of such an order, or at least a scepticism about the possibility of achieving it. It is this trajectory that Central European Bildung-narratives share with non-European post-colonial ones. Bypassing Rue Descartes is saying exactly this, as it mentions Saigon and Marrakesh in the same breath as Wilno and Bucharest, and the similarity of its journey to, for example, V.S. Naipaul's *Mimic Men* or Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (to mention two widely-known works) is obvious, although in the latter cases the metropole is London rather than Paris.

It has to be stressed that the ideals and the disappointments do not merge into a synthesis, there is no 'the hero returns sadder but wiser' conclusion, and the narrative remains haunted by figures conveying a sense of fragmentation, guilt, loss, and possibly anger. Hence, Central European narratives of personhood generally convey the great psychological stress of living without the ability to construct a coherent self, as they associate it with feelings of immaturity, incompleteness, and impotence in dealing with what appears to be an equally fluid world. Their counter-strategies employ either irony or self-pity, or most commonly some combination of the two.

Witold Gombrowicz's *Ferdydurke*, a magnificent anti-Bildungsroman, written in 1937 faces all the described motifs head on. To my mind, it is wholly free of self-pity but its delight in irony and paradoxes, the contradictions and gaps that it uses, make it very much a part of the tradition.

The first-person-narrator is an adult writer, who is turned into a schoolboy by a patronising professor, and who gradually comes to accept the role. The novel has been read as being about degeneration under alien powers; to my mind, however, it is far more ambiguous and complex than that. As the narrator conveys it, the 'mature' people in the book are not very different from himself: they all continuously make 'faces' and participate in various strange intricate games and rituals to construct or consolidate identities in the fluid world, only they do not seem to analyse it as the narrator does, or even be aware of it.

*Ferdydurke* thinks its way through the familiar modern oppositions of authenticity/inauthenticity, tradition/change, adulthood/adolescence, and does it entirely in its own terms - by dramatising their ritualised interplay. The novel, not surprisingly, has recently been called postmodern, but these 'postmodern' features can just be interpreted as a relaxed but profound description of non-West-European life-experience, description of life without a belief in Grand Narratives - and in this case also without sadness because of their absence.

Milan Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*, a Künstlerroman from the Soviet period in Central Europe, is a parody of the traditional 'artist biography' and a angrily sarcastic account of the Romantic world-picture. The artist figure, Jaromil, is unable to mature and pull loose from his domineering mother who has decided that he is to be a great poet almost before he is born. He is constantly nagged by a
sense of unsatisfaction and fear that real, authentic life is elsewhere. Looking for heroic purpose in the dizzying fluidity of his society, he throws himself in the adventure of communist revolution and subsequently becomes a collaborator of the Secret Police. Finally, in a parodic refiguration of a mature hero's return home, he dies from a trivial cold in his Mother's arms. For Kundera, the Narcissistic unifying world-vision of Romanticism is the ultimate immaturity, equalised with the desire to return to the mother's womb.

Having discussed narratives in Soviet and pre-Soviet time, it would be important to consider, what, if anything, has changed now. My example is an Estonian novel -*Border Country* (1993) by Emil Tode - so, I would be grateful to hear, if you think it corresponds with other literatures in the region.

The protagonist and narrator of Emil Tode's *Border country* (or *Marchlands*) is a translator of French poetry, and becomes yet another young East European to go to Paris, Milosz's 'capital of the world', to "see how humans live". This time it is the Paris of the early 1990s, a 'postmodern place', where the Universal Pinnacle of Civilisation, is embodied in the welfare state. Other universal belief systems seem to have faded: and whereas a Western character half-heartedly complains about the disappearance of Real History, the post-Soviet narrator sees all capital-initialed history as apocalyptic and "uncomfortable" by definition.

The translator-narrator is a true borderline figure, a traveller across and in the void of different timespaces evoked by the narration, who feels marginal or invisible on all sides. The narration is fragmented, blending motifs from the Parisian metro, pre- and early-modern rural landscapes and Soviet factories and panel-houses and the reader cannot be sure how much of the account 'really happened'. It also remains ambiguous whether the story is narrated by a man or a woman, or what the narrator's exact origins are - s/he only refers to it as "the country I come from", "Eastern Europe", "up there in the North as they say here" - or as to "the Lost World".

Indeed, not to be treated "as a relative of the dear departed" (as at a funeral) the narrator frequently (and successfully) pretends to be Swedish. Yet the nameless Lost World returns in sudden memories or Proustian sensory associations and dominates the narrator's often very vivid dreams and nightmares. Furthermore, it is this half-repressed baggage of memories and feelings that indirectly triggers the murder history at the centre of the sujet.

Death - the crossing of final borders - is a persistent figure in *Border Country*. "Up there in the North, death is a great temptation," narrator says; Eastern Europe is "a row of dark countries lamenting their still-born history", and Paris may be equally dead, only mummified, and therefore looks better. The counter-force to death, mummification, forgetting and final loss of self in fragmentation is in the power of narrativisation, in being able to tell one's story to someone. The story of self, which makes up most of *Border Country*, is written for the narrator's imaginary Other, called Angelo. The reader first 'sees' the narrator when Angelo
says to him/her: "You have strange eyes - as if you were observing the world. You are not French, are you". Thus, as the narrator creates Angelo, Angelo in turn creates the narrator, even if the narrator's identity can only be expressed in partial and negative terms.

**Conclusion**

The texts discussed were obviously rather restricted because of the time limit. Yet one can conclude that all works considered are united by a variety of motifs. There is the perception that the recognised legitimate trajectory to adulthood is alien and presupposes estrangement from 'home'. The fragmentation and non-resolution of the protagonists' life-path points towards the ever-present counter-agencies that impede a development that the Western Bildungsroman takes for granted. Further, the protagonist's youthful dreams that an authentic, "true" trajectory is available, always end in grave disappointment. In other words, all these texts share a perception of fluidity, fragmentation of self, constraint on legitimate agency and of non-acceptance by a stylised Other. There is also a family resemblance in the manner in which these works, varied in space and time as they are, conceptualise and rationalise this life-experience. All of these - Gombrowicz's human comedy on the mechanisms of identity construction; Kundera's poisonous account of Romantic Grand Narratives; Milosz's and Tode's hybrid inconclusive life-journeys - in some form deny the Enlightenment-Romantic Historicist model of self-fullfillment. For them, if one manages to construct a 'story of life' of some coherence, it is a record of stressful negotiations through many particularised small narratives, rather than teleologically uncovering one Grand Narrative. This makes the Central European idea of *Bildung* structurally similar to that outside Europe, and consequently so-called post-colonial literature and studies could be of considerable interest to scholars of Central European Comparative Literature.

**Bibliography**


