

## INTRODUCTION

On the Role of  
**The Eastern  
European  
Imagination in  
Literature**

**By Kenneth McRobbie**

One may begin by affirming that in many important respects the writer is more central in his profession and in society, literature in closer contact with life, the imagination more fully engaged in the countries of Eastern Europe than in those of the West.

It is a commonplace to speak of Western Man, of Western literature, in the sense of denoting what is European. Within this larger area exist regions: Mediterranean, Scandinavian, English-speaking. Eastern Europe too may be said to exist as a definable category. Geographically, the region is hardly less unwieldy than that of Western Europe—running from Finland in the North to Greece in the South, from the old Hapsburg territories of Austria-Bohemia in the West, to those of old imperial Russia eastwards as far as the Urals. There are some common factors. Socio-economically, the region is one in which

predominantly peasant societies are undergoing rapid transformation. Militarily, the open terrain has facilitated the passage of armies and invited the redrawing of frontiers. Politically, the principle of nationality and movements for independence together with constitutional and legal reform have dominated public life during the past two centuries. Culturally, across the whole spectrum of the arts there have survived enriching elements of a broadly-based folk culture—represented in this issue by the Latvian *dainas* and the recurrent Rite of Life—perhaps most familiar to Westerners through its transmutation in the music of Bartók and Kodály. And here too the relative poverty and the small-scale family intimacy in the atmosphere of those nations are no less important common factors.

When we come to literature, however, generalization is less easy. Despite the family resemblances of the several Slavic languages, and the widespread knowledge of German that is the result of centuries-long penetration, there are formidable linguistic barriers. These tend to divide the literatures of the region one from another, almost though not quite to the extent that they close off all of those literatures from Western readers. However, the unfamiliarity of the English-speaking world with the literatures of Eastern Europe is rather a function of the former's privileged isolation, which has denied it even that physical contact experienced by the French and Germans, despite the great interest shown by Eastern European authors and readers in the cultural movements of the West. Certainly, perspectives in the West have long been shaped by influences from Eastern Europe—whether in astronomy in the early modern period, in socialist theory and practice in the later, or in literature by such basic reinterpretations as Conrad's of the concept of progress and Jan Kott's of Shakespeare as well as (on Richard Switzer's showing here) by the introduction of certain themes and atmosphere.

But this comparative isolationism on the part of English readers has changed somewhat of late, for reasons other than the voracious appetite of the printing trade. To return to our categories. Geographically, the lands of the Eastern European region are increasingly attractive to Western travellers; they are becoming linked to the West by trading patterns; and they continue to interest the considerable emigré groups and more particularly their often less partisan descendents. Politically, looked at in necessarily simplistic terms, East Europe is inevitably of significance to a West which regards the region's more or less total adherence to Communism with a mixture of curiosity and trepidation. Culturally, several countries in the area show every sign of maintaining their own distinctive national character and cultural identity, no mean achievement today for all who cherish the autonomy of small countries in an epoch of almost irresistible pressures towards conformity and standardization. Such cultural vitality, of course, is deeply indebted to literature, to each nation's modulation of the collective experience that is its history through the instrument of its own distinctive tongue. Concerning the literature of the region, the nature of the interest shown in the West ranges from the common journalistic trick of using a poet as a stick with which to beat a regime with whose tenets one disagrees, all the way to the view that the literature of certain Eastern European countries may be seen as affording a corrective to some deficiencies in the culture of the West.

The difference between the literatures of the two regions, according to

Jean-Paul Sartre's formulation in Prague a few years ago, is that in the East writers have "something to write about," whereas their counterparts in the West are condemned to the sterile elaboration of empty form. One can accept this statement to the extent that one is aware that the writer in Eastern Europe is considered as having work to do on a scale and at a level of public responsibility unavailable to his essentially more private Western counterpart. It is, and has always been, a question of differing social attitudes, structures, and roles. In as much as long-standing traditions rather than purely present circumstances are responsible, it is often both proper and necessary to employ sociological methodology in surveying Eastern European literature, as Gertrude Joch Robinson demonstrates in her article on Yugoslav authors. All phases of the creative process—style, content, financing, distribution (and non-distribution)—are susceptible to analysis according to the various proclaimed socio-political objectives which have long played an essential part in the culture of the region. Above all, there is the special role and status that attach to the profession of author, particularly the poet, who wields considerable public prestige and influence, reflected in the scale of rewards as also in the possible penalties, due to the high valuation set upon literature, the erratic process of social evolution, and the absence of supplementary communications infrastructures such as one finds in Western countries. "I am my political economy," is one young poet's self-description to the writer recently.

The contents of this issue, on the Eastern European Imagination in Literature, range from extremely personal essays by professional writers of wide reputation to specialized scholarly contributions. In as much as it was deemed essential to present the historical dimension, limitations of space imposed some selectivity. Thus, it was decided to omit the literatures of the territories of the Soviet Union, on the grounds that the achievements of individual writers there over the past century or more are so familiar through translation as by now to be a precious part of world literature. Very different, though, is the situation regarding even the most famous sons of most other Eastern European countries.

It is no coincidence that the cover of this issue carries a portrait of the most famous Hungarian poet, Sándor Petőfi, and that three articles presented here discuss aspects of his life and work. For this year marks the 150th anniversary of Petőfi's birth. Although he is invariably cited in works on nineteenth-century European literature and history, comparatively little is known of him by non-specialists. Here we present passages in English translation from the classic work on Petőfi by the distinguished Hungarian poet, Gyula Illyés, whose prose is eloquent of the concerns of Hungarian writers in our own time too. It is a measure of the difficulties confronting Western readers that there is still no adequate selection of the poet's work in volume form, at least in English. Yet here was genius—as poet, journalist, translator, playwright, actor, soldier, and maker of a revolution—which fulfilled itself within the brief life-span of twenty-six years, before death from the thrust of a Cossack's lance, on the battlefield of Segesvár in the face of the overwhelming odds of Russian armies in support of Austrian forces, and burial in an unknown grave. Still Petőfi is an archetypal figure for Eastern European writers. His commitment to national independence, freedom and reform, and not least of all to his new poetic tone of colloquialism and revival of folksong forms,

all stemmed from his passionate identification with the people. It is of this unique populism which has inspired so much great literature that George Bizstray writes, in the wider East-Central European context, in "With the People through a Thousand Dangers." In comparison with the turning away on the part of Western poets after 1848 from political and social problems, one may see how the writers of the region in large measure subscribed to doctrines which Western opinion has hitherto associated only with the theoretical writings of the Russian revolutionary democrats. Petőfi is the central figure in any discussion of the growing numbers of writers, particularly poets, who regarded literature as an appropriate means of social action rather than an art for art's sake, and the poet as something more than a Romantic-mystical prophet. Finally, in an article devoted to a presentation of one of the Hungarian poet's best-loved works, the colourful folk epic *János vitéz* which he terms the "People's Epic," Lóránt Czigány underlines Petőfi's closeness to and affection for the people. The bond was basic. Poets were all the closer to the people for sharing with them the essential tie of the native tongue, particularly at times when in conducting state and other business the nobility and bureaucracy emphasized, depending on the country, one or other foreign language: Latin, German, French, even Russian. As Illyés shows, mere "research" into folk traditions and forms cannot achieve poetic expression: that has to come through first studying the spirit of the people. This Petőfi did, in addition to being perhaps supreme in the whole history of poetry as a political poet in combining the lyrical with the political. His tragedy was that alone he could not create the all-important general historical situation. But tragedies never occur in vain.

Between the image of Petőfi that emerges here and the concern of our leading article, Ernst Fischer's "The Political Dream," there is an essential connection. It is fitting that pride of place be given to a contribution from one of the very few intellectual humanists of this century, whose burning concern for art and literature found eloquent expression within the necessary context of social evolution, ideological analysis, and the needs and nature of man. From the central perspective of his native Vienna and from his personal commitment to Marxism, he derived unique insights into the destinies of the neighbouring Eastern European countries. Though best known as a philosopher, Fischer was also a poet and activist, possessed of hope, daring, and a dream. It is a dream of a coming to pass, a new dispensation for man at a level above that of a purely material gratification such as is in danger of becoming the goal of East and West alike. Something better is possible, something better has been earned, in that region which has witnessed in this century the reign of three empires, the clash of two more powerful imperiums, the redrawing of frontiers, regrouping of peoples. Like Zenta Maurina, the distinguished Latvian author whose article follows upon his, Fischer takes as a starting point the dangers of nihilism, particularly among Western writers, compounded of resignation, pessimism and self-regard. For both of our authors, literature is a vehicle of that imagination within whose power it is to dream in the light of day, calling into being a vision which while acknowledging the limits of present reality is yet able to view even these as transitory, which reveals the possible, which like the secret revelations of the Scriptures preaches revolution—and which alone can reach out, beyond the minority cult status of literature in

the West, to take hold of the masses. Starting out from a less immediately socially-orientated standpoint, Zenta Maurina in her "Western versus Eastern Man" emphasizes one other aspect of the Eastern European imagination. Drawing on her profound knowledge of Russian literature she asserts that as the main repository of spiritual values over the past century it is representative of the character of authors' concerns in some other parts of Eastern Europe. She makes her case in more familiar terms when she speaks of the poet as constituting a second government, as unique portrayer of his people, to whom alone it is given to see from within, as risk-taker, sacrifice—as one less concerned with the Western sense of personal dignity than with compassion, this expressed with a directness and warmth and personal sense of immediate experience such as have gone out of the art of the West. All this in quest of what Freud termed a sickness: the quest for the meaning of life.

Imagination in the literatures of Eastern Europe, then, is public in the most humanly connecting sense. This may be seen here in the case of four less well-known authors. Two are from Poland in the last century. The first of these is the poet Cyprian Norwid (died 1883) who, in ineffectual isolation abroad, an emigré, once beset by censorship in Austrian-dominated Venice, despite his remoteness—and while continuing to cultivate esthetic and formal interests—affirmed that the artist was the "organizer of the national imagination," who ought to improve and educate his fellow-countrymen. By comparison, the more obscure Apollo N. Korzeniowski leaps into significance for English readers at least as the father of Joseph Conrad. The illustrious son, Czesław Miłosz suggests, may have derived some of his attitudes to "the dark past" from his family's experiences: his view of destiny as struggle, of the need for tenacity, of hope being the more necessary because illogical. His father's career as author, though, was pursued in the more activist environment of reform and oppositional programmes in a Poland which he saw as crucified and undergoing tortures from which it might yet arise purified. There he showed that he anticipated the recurrent arguments against radical change, based on the collusion of opportunistic ruling elements, attachment to material gain, the acquiescing in modest comfort and stability which is the sign of weak nerves and a sense of hopelessness. The other two authors are our contemporaries by comparison. The Croatian writer Miroslav Krleža (born 1893) expressed, as Darko Suvin demonstrates in terms of his dramas around the time of World War One, a desire for independence within—and this is the new note—the framework of that emerging great hope of many intellectuals of Eastern Europe, nascent Communism. Hence, his invocation in apocalyptic Nietzschean terms of freedom and individuality, that ascent from the Pannonian mire to the Pole star, includes a lyrical invocation of Lenin as the new Columbus, discoverer of the twenty-second century. Here is the imaginative response to Marxism which of all political systems has addressed itself most seriously to the role of literature and the arts in society. But the tenets of Marxism are one thing, the form and method of their application another. It is with the latter that Josef Škvorecký, a distinguished novelist who left Czechoslovakia after 1968, deals in a contribution eloquent of the artist's painful involvement in social and ideological conflict amid the politics of power. The bitterness of exiles has much to teach. Škvorecký may be joining with others here in affirming that the word revolution must be understood not

narrowly but in that more profound sense implicit in the Hungarian for it, *forrádalom*, based on the word "boiling" and thus carrying the implication that a whole society is in ferment. To be political a writer particularly must have this wider, and warmer, concept of public affairs.

It is certainly possible to discuss the literature of Eastern Europe, and the works of authors already referred to, in more narrowly artistic terms of form and aesthetic texture. And we include two articles on the central question of modernism in the arts and the admissibility or usefulness of the avant-garde—a measure commonly applied by Western critics, by which the putative amount of freedom enjoyed by Eastern European societies is equated with the degree of artistic experimentation present there.

Experimentation in the arts is a matter of tone as well as mode. For several decades most Eastern European countries have maintained contact with the different modes of experimental modernism originating in the West. As Thomas G. Winner points out concerning avant-garde prose, Czechoslovakia was for long virtually part of the Western avant-garde tradition. At the present time, it is comparatively easy for artists in the East to experiment with different forms. As to tone, however, we are reminded that Kafka was an Eastern European writer and that it is in large measure his tone which underlies the scepticism and irony of many of the best modernist works of the region. One advantage of this as far as Western readers are concerned, George Gömöri suggests in his discussion of the new Hungarian drama of the 1960s, is that such works by younger writers prove more exportable than many naturalistic and localized masterpieces of some of the greatest exponents of the Eastern nations' literatures. In the West the theatre or the novel of the absurd is often simply a document on the hopelessness of the generalized human condition. In Eastern European countries, it is the complex "mad logic" of certain aspects of existence in societies undergoing transformation, under the stress of power and opportunism within the all-important contexts of supreme idealism and historical tradition, which invites treatment according to "absurdist" categories—rather than pessimistic belief that every social system must inevitably suffer from unchangeable deformations. Modernism has one other attraction, as we learn from a survey of the attitudes of Yugoslav writers: namely, that it seems to afford additional scope for probings into individual psychology—though there is always the danger that fashions of a less readily comprehensible (and thus ideologically "safer") expression may isolate the writer from his audience and his traditionally humanistic concerns.

A study of the themes of literature in the countries of Eastern Europe suggests to a Western reader that the issues seem larger, more seems to be at stake, experience as well as imagination move in channels cut desperately deep by common experience of war and its aftermath, destruction and social transformation. History may be defined as man's attempt and need to make sense out of the present as much as the past; certainly, to that extent the literature of the region is a part of history, where history has not cooled and is so warmly alive as a young Hungarian poet put it recently. Two senselessly destructive world wars began in the countries to the East where perhaps their greatest impact was felt. While there are numerous treatments of the theme of war in the literatures of Eastern Europe, the topic is by no means exhausted. One of the most individual works on the last war is a novel not yet published in East-

ern Europe, as Stanley Corngold informs us, *The Painted Bird* by the Polish author Jerzy Kosinski. Here imagination emerges as perhaps the only instrument capable of representing reality at the limit of endurance, because its method is to proceed via that necessary act of self-interpretation which goes in advance of the conventional wisdom, everyday modes of seeing and accepted morality. As part of history's attempt to make sense of action past and present, literature may proceed by presenting the consequences of action. This is a beginning in which, too, is the word, the need on the part of the writer to speak to someone; this finding of one's voice is the first stage of ascent from the abasement wrought by violence in our time. Language is the key also for the German poet Johannes Bobrowski, writing of those neighbouring borderlands of lost *Pruzzen* that gave Prussia its name. As Dagmar Barnouw shows, for this poet speech is the language not so much of the suffering of peoples who may now be beyond the power of speaking but of the guilt and responsibility of the living. By rescuing the word from those heedlessly man-created abstractions which may overlay the past, with his "meaningful historiography, for which the poet is uniquely gifted," the poet is able to preserve the particular through language and image-making, and with his imagination is able to give continuity amid the changes made for precise causes whose effects man can never fully know. And looking ahead maybe only the writer can show, as has been suggested concerning Kosinski, that "a correct politics [can] come only out of an act of self-interpretation," and, most important, it will "have to bear the characteristics of this act."

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