

Central and Eastern European Literary Theory and the West.
Edited by Michał Mrugalski, Schamma Schahadat,
and Irina Wutsdorff

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It is, evidently, a futile task to introduce a scholarly work of nearly a thousand pages within the framework of a journal review. In the paragraphs that follow below I will not attempt to do so—I will merely endeavour to provide an overview of what the reader will find in the pages of the volume and then raise some issues in connection with the organising idea of the book.

This collection of studies, edited by Michał Mrugalski, Schamma Schahadat, and Irina Wutsdorff (in collaboration with Danuta Ulicka), is a grand undertaking to reconstruct the context and dynamic of modern literary theory in Central and Eastern Europe. The editors believe that this dynamic is easiest to grasp through the concept of *transfer* and, consequently, the studies in the volume focus on “exchange, transfer, migration and entanglement” (p. 4)¹ between cultural spheres and academic fields.

The three components of transfer, the (geographical and intellectual) space, where it transpires, the person, who enacts it and the subject itself that *migrates* (in this case, ideas, methods and concepts of literary theory), all receive attention, while the translation or transformation of the migrating concepts is also highlighted as a process of significance.

The material the volume covers is limited both in space and time. There is a clear focus on Central and Eastern Europe or, more specifically, the transfers that take place between Russian, Czech, Polish and German regions, and it spans approximately a century from the appearance of Russian formalism to the present day.

1 Page numbers in brackets are provided for each quote from the volume.

The editors' declared objective is not to create a grand narrative, but to put the theories and narratives that stem "from small cultures" (p. 9) into a transcultural context and to introduce the *histoire croisée* of 20th-century literary theory.

The volume is made up of four main sections (1/ *Introduction: Entangled Literary Theory*, 2/ *Formations of Literary Theory: Schools and Institutions, Concepts and Methods* 3/ *Beyond Literary Theory* 4/ *Some Key Terms*), which differ considerably in both length and weight.

Section 1 is largely a description of the editorial approach: the *Introduction* presents the approach itself, while the studies that follow provide examples of its different aspects. The starting point of the *Introduction* is Galin Tihanov's claim that the work around modern literary theory, which had its beginnings in Central and Eastern Europe, lost its momentum by the last third of the century, and it dissolved partly in W. Iser's literary anthropology and partly in Ju. Lotman's cultural semiotics. According to Tihanov, literary theory was relevant while it was considered an autonomous and distinct discourse; however, the authors of the work pose the question "whether literary theory [...] from the very beginning, [...] was always also a theory of culture" (p. 5). The volume as a whole supports the latter version, insofar as the studies it contains do not only place the subject into a broad cultural context but also focus on the connections and associations between this subject, that is, the various schools and concepts of literary theory, and other areas of culture and science.

The articles following the editorial introduction examine various components of literary *transfer*. Two works examine the development of the subject of transfer, that is certain concepts (specifically, Shklovsky's term of *estrangement* and Bakhtin's *concept of dialogism* and *intertextuality*), while one study points to the significance of translation in such a process. The study entitled *The Migrants of Theory* places the person involved in the transfer at the centre and demonstrates three different modes of academic mobility, which plays a fundamental role in scholarly transfer, through the careers of three outstanding academics: Roman Jakobson, Manfred Kridl, and Julia Kristeva. *Spaces of Theory* focuses on the geographic and cultural-intellectual spaces which are central to transfer, highlighting the importance of "intimate spaces," which, although hard to reconstruct, play a significant role in interpersonal connections.

The editors intended Section 2 to be the "the core of our book" (p. 16). This section is also the most substantial of the four in terms of volume: it is made up of nine chapters, each containing between three and six studies. The first chapter describes the institutional background of the academic work undertaken in the field of art and literary theory in the first decades of the 20th century, while the rest of the chapters focus on specific movements or authors and their circle in literary theory, showcasing an array of exceptionally rich and colourful material. However, this movement-centred division practically expands beyond the concept demonstrated in

the first section of the book. The linkages between the chapters and the studies within the chapters are significantly weaker than before: each study approaches the movement it reviews with a different focus, scope or perspective, and, fundamentally, they all stay within the bounds of a traditional description in scientific or cultural history.

Six of the studies focus on formalism, which reflects the key role that the editors attribute to formalism in cultural transfer: “If we take into consideration the predecessors and the heirs of Russian formalism, formalism appears to be a turning point rather than a beginning, absorbing and transforming ideas which in turn are then used, migrate, are rewritten and turn into something other than what they were” (p. 13). *The Four Faces of Russian Formalism*, a study that stands out in every respect in this chapter, outlines a new typology of Russian formalism and identifies significant differences between the “morphological” formalism of OPOJAZ, the “quantitative” formalism of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, the “functionalist” formalism of the 1920s, and the thinking in the phenomenologist wing of the Moscow Linguistic Circle. Besides this study, which presents Russian formalism in great detail, there is a study each that examine formalism in Germany and in Poland, the former focusing on the evolution of the concept of form in the German intellectual sphere and the latter on the phenomenologist branch of Polish poetics. The last two studies of the chapter each trace a different “path” of the reception of the movement in the West: Yuri Striedter’s interpretation of formalism and how it was viewed in North America.

The volume devotes three chapters to phenomenology, all of which, focusing on its Russian, Czech and Polish versions, touch upon the idea that phenomenology cannot be viewed as an independent school of literary theory as, in spite of being a part of literary theory for a long time, it was always interconnected with other intellectual currents. The chapter on hermeneutics is also made up of three studies, of which the text on the history and work of the German *Poetics and Hermeneutics* group stands closest in its approach to the book’s editorial concept, as besides recounting the history and achievements of the group, it gives special consideration to “the entanglement [...] with theories from Central and Eastern European philosophers and literary scholars” (p. 282).

The majority of the studies in the chapter that focuses on the connections between psychoanalysis and literary studies assume a descriptive-historical stance as they tell the history of Jungian analysis in Russia or the establishment of psychoanalysis in Poland. The most highly conceptualized piece in this chapter focuses on the question of reader response on the basis of the scholarship of Vygotsky and Voloshinov.

The most exciting writing in the chapter devoted to the connections between literary theory and sociology and Marxist theory examines the correspondence and debate among three authors, György Lukács, Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno,

who all had a close connection with Marxism but worked in different institutional and political contexts, positioning the question of the relationship between art and reality at the centre. The author of the study that reviews Marxist literary theory in Poland highlights the conflict between “*simulating (mimesis) and organising (poesis) the social*” (p. 489) as the defining tension within this school.

Among others, the chapter on structuralism and semiotics reviews the connections between formalism and structuralism, the anthropological orientation of Prague structuralism, and the two, in many ways opposing, generations of Polish structuralism. One of the most outstanding studies of the volume as a whole is the writing about Russian structuralism and semiotics. After an introduction that describes the fundamental openness of semiotics, it reviews the characteristics of the two locations and traditions (Moscow and Tartu) connected by the concept of *structural semiotics*, followed by a summary of the work of Yuri Lotman’s closest colleagues, in which it outlines the narrower context in which the scholar of Tartu conducted his investigations. In Lotman’s oeuvre itself, the author establishes three periods on the basis of the expansion of the meaning and scope of the concept of sign and text. In conclusion, he expresses his agreement with those scholars who maintain that “Lotman, like Ivanov and Uspenskii, did not present an epistemologically well-founded and consistent theoretical concept of signs (and, I might add: also of texts and/or of cultures). The strength of the semiotic research of the semioticians of the Tartu–Moscow School—and this is valid a fortiori for Lotman—lies not in the discussion and presentation of theoretical notions but in the application of semiotics to quite different matters and periods in the history of human culture” (p. 749).

Walter Benjamin is the main subject of one of the chapters about individual people, and the author looks at his work from the perspective of how Benjamin saw Russia and Poland, and how Russian writers and academics impacted his work. Another one of the chapters has Mikhail Bakhtin as its main subject (as, based on the number of quotes, also does the book as a whole). A separate study reviews the history of the Bakhtin Circles, also reviewing the question of the authorship of the disputed Bakhtin texts. The central study of the chapter problematizes the issue of the significance of whether Bakhtin is considered to be a philosopher, a literary scholar, or a linguist from the point of view of understanding his oeuvre as a whole. The author of the study states that Bakhtin considered himself, first and foremost, a philosopher, and only the Bakhtin publications of the 1960s and 1970s positioned him as a literary scholar for reasons of censorship. The author goes on to designate *dialogic consciousness* (p. 567) as the essential category of Bakhtin’s philosophy and outlines a developmental arc, in which dialogism is linked to the *act* (p. 571), another fundamental category in Bakhtin’s work, the three stages of which are defined in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act, Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity and Problems*

of *Dostoevsky's Poetics*. The closing study in the Bakhtin chapter reviews the (re)discovery of the Russian thinker in Anglophone criticism (p. 593). The author sets out by highlighting the difference between Western and Russian reception: “while American and UK Slavists were carefully assimilating Bakhtin into a recognizable, if evolving tradition of Slavic formalist-structuralist criticism, his champions in the Soviet Union were busy establishing as much distance as they could between him and that very same tradition” (p. 594). Then, he goes on to outline the interpretative framework of Clark and Holquist’s Bakhtin translation and biography, which played a key role in the Anglophone reception. Finally, he highlights the linkages between the feminist and postcolonialist schools and Bakhtin’s *heteroglossia* (p. 602), *double-voicing* (p. 603), *hybridization* (p. 603) concepts—and by doing so preparing the groundwork for the third large section of the volume.

Section 3 is devoted to concepts which are more loosely connected to the already canonised paradigms of literary theory and which developed in parallel or after these. An example of parallel development is Nikolai Marr’s theory of semantic palaeontology, which was formed in the first decades of the 20th century.

Another four studies review the schools that developed after the “death of literary theory”. The writing that focuses on post-colonial studies states already in its introduction that in this school of thought a “properly literary focus was at times less prominent” (p. 807). The author of the study that traces the development of cultural studies takes the ideas of Antony Easthorpe as a starting point, according to which the weakening of the conflict between the canon and popular culture led to the discreditation of the special status of literary theory. While the author considers the sociopolitical context of the concept to be questionable, the study describes the shift towards cultural studies by reviewing a set of social processes and the answers offered to them by various intellectual movements (the Frankfurt School and [post-]structuralism). The next study in the section discusses how translation studies became independent, while the paper that closes Section 3 focuses on contemporary activist humanities, by which the author means the currents within contemporary humanities “that engage their explanatory powers to improve the situation of oppressed actors in the cultural field, such as women, people of colour or queer people, and in most cases hail from postcolonial and cultural studies and the philosophy of Michel Foucault” (p. 863).

Section 4 of the volume explains some key terms connected to various schools of thought that appear in the studies of the earlier sections. Encyclopaedia-style articles explain briefly nine concepts in alphabetical order. Following the rich and complex material in the earlier sections these articles feel somewhat simplistic and unnecessary as the reader can find the meaning(s) and context(s) of these concepts in the relevant studies on the preceding pages.

Perhaps even this inevitably brief overview reflects the extraordinary wealth of material the book has to offer. The texts are well-structured, easy to follow and attest to their authors' comprehensive and profound knowledge of their subject matter. The thematic connections between the individual studies are often reinforced by internal references, each study is followed by an extensive list of references, and an index of names assists orientation in the work. All of the above make the volume an information-rich and easy-to-use handbook.

At the same time, as is the case with all well-delineated concepts, the fundamentals of this book also raise certain questions, two of which I wish to highlight. One of them is the applied geographical boundaries, and the other is the approach taken to the subject of enquiry.

On the one hand, delineating Central and Eastern Europe and the West as two large historical and political units feels self-evident. However, on the other hand, the relevance of this delineation is questionable in the cultural-intellectual sphere. It is exactly the dynamic, which is an important component of the organising concept of the book manifested through migration and historical transformations, that relativizes the boundaries between the two geographical units, whether on the level of state formations or personal identities.

The editorial introduction also briefly reflects on the absence of certain territories that could be considered to be part of the two regions, citing the "lack of relevant expertise" (p. 10) as the reason for the omission of some parts of Central and Eastern Europe. However, the reader receives no explanation why, in the context of the West, a separate chapter was not devoted to French (post-)structuralism, which is only briefly mentioned in various locations, although it is a defining school of 20th-century literary theory and it developed in close contact with literary theory in Central and Eastern Europe, or why the connections between Danish linguistic structuralism and scholarship in Central and Eastern Europe are omitted altogether.

Apart from a few exceptions, the West in the book largely corresponds to the German-speaking regions of Europe, partly due to the authors' affiliations. Out of a total of 33 authors, 14 are affiliated with higher education institutions in Germany. In the eastern region, we find one Russian, one Czech, and three Polish institutions in the *Contributors* section.² This proportion also means that there is a visibly external perspective vis-à-vis Central and Eastern Europe, and an internal perspective of the German-speaking region, which may be somewhat altered by the difference between some of the authors' country of origin and country of affiliation.

2 In addition to these, three Swiss, two Canadian, four U.S., four British, and one French institution is listed with the authors' names.

The different directions of migration that the book traces are likely connected to this characteristic of the perspectives. The editors state as the main objective of the volume to trace the paths and western reception of concepts of literary theory emanating from, and possibly flowing back to, Central and Eastern Europe. At the same time, in several chapters—notably, in the case of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and psychoanalysis—the western source has a decisive role with a counterflow of ideas, and the studies focus on their reception in Central and Eastern Europe. This is, of course, not a problem, but it underscores what one of the book's authors points out and is probably not only true in the case of structuralism and semiotics, which they review: “the transfer of literary theory should not be imagined as a one-way movement from East to West. It is a much more complex, reciprocal motion” (p. 756).

The three movements highlighted above draw our attention to the other question: that of the subject of the analysis and the approach applied. As the studies that explore these movements also underscore, in the case of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and psychoanalysis, literary thought is merely a lesser branch of the movement as a whole. In the case of formalism, structuralism, and semiotics, literary theory is practically equivalent to methodological considerations, as also mentioned in the two studies on Polish and Russian structuralism. Overall, it seems that whatever vantage point literary theory might take to its subject, literature, it always transcends its own boundaries and, to a lesser or greater extent, dissolves in intellectual currents and/or methodological considerations.

The question that the editorial *Introduction* poses and was cited at the beginning of this review refers to specifically this characteristic of literary theory, contemplating the possibility of viewing (at least in part) the intellectual currents normally considered to be literary theory / literary studies, both of which terms appear in the studies, often as synonyms, as cultural theory. However, if this (pre)conception prevails in our investigations, it dilutes the contours of a subject (literary theory) already difficult to define even more, as it is further amplified by the explicitly stated objective of the book; that is, a shift in the focus away from the subject itself and towards the context.

This context, apart from the somewhat contentious geographic delineation as shown above, is not limited or structured in the volume in any way, making the book a conglomerate of texts which approach their subjects with a variety of focuses, scales and perspectives, and among which we find biographies, as well as studies which describe institutions, focus on certain typologies or the history of ideas, highlight a certain aspect of a person's oeuvre, interpret one or more specific texts or their interpretations, trace the reception of certain concepts, or describe the development of a discipline, as well as several studies which blend several of these approaches.

The absence of the concept of the *text* and any considerations that might stem from it is quite conspicuous. It feels like the editors and authors were trying to keep a distance from the theory and practice of Lotman's conception of culture and also intertextuality, which may be a result of the intention to underscore the anthropological aspect and, above all, the social embeddedness of intellectual currents. This is, of course, a valid and relevant position, but its implementation in the volume, in my opinion, leads to a methodological paradox in relation to the subject under examination: as a whole, the volume is extremely convincing and professional in its profound knowledge of the subject, but in terms of its approach and methods, it provides a traditional (fundamentally historical) description of a segment of culture that has attempted—in various ways—to transcend precisely this type of approach to culture and, within it, to literature.

Translated by Kristóf Hegedűs

