

Diversity in Narration and Writing: The Novel. Edited by Kornélia Horváth, Judit Mudriczki, and Sarolta Osztróluczky

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Biodiversity, ethnic diversity, cultural diversity, gender and sexual diversity, neurodiversity—it is evident that acknowledging or promoting differences and suspicion toward homogenizing ambitions have been highly significant trends in the public discourse of the past decades. In this context, the title of this book may suggest a work analyzing how these issues inform and shape narratives. But, as it turns out, diversity is not its topic, but its *modus operandi*: this is not a collection of essays *about* diversity but simply a rather diverse collection in which there is no thematic thread linking the papers other than the very general one that they concern themselves with questions in some connection with narrative texts. Even the subtitle (*The Novel*) is slightly misleading: Gábor Kovács’s paper, for example, deals with two *short stories* by Jack London. The introduction (written by co-editor Judit Mudriczki) does not make matters very clear either since it employs evasively paradoxical rhetoric regarding the criteria of selection (“the editors of this volume decided to make a selection of essays available to a larger audience to show the diversity of approaches to narrative fiction that the participants had in common”, p. 1). Furthermore, the introduction ends on a decidedly agnostic note: “instead of coming to a firm conclusion,” as Mudriczki writes, it finishes with a “deliberately provocative” quote from Hungarian writer Géza Ottlik: “It would be a shame to find an answer to the question: what is the novel?” (p. 7). Thus, it seems that the catchword in the title serves merely to give a semblance of coherence to a volume that is lacking it.

This is a strange strategy since it leaves many conspicuous questions regarding the conception of the book unanswered. If the principal aim was diversity, why does it almost completely ignore everything beyond Anglophone and Hungarian literature? Why is, on the other hand, Hungarian literature so overrepresented? (Eleven

out of the nineteen essays address Hungarian works.) And why is the list of contributors so homogenous? (Except for the first essay, which is an excerpt from a forthcoming book by esteemed cultural theorist Mieke Bal, all the authors work or study at a university or research institute in Hungary.) After reading the book over, it becomes obvious what it really is: an English-language showcase for a loose circle of Hungarian literary scholars that, for some reason, tries to conceal its identity but fails to devise an alternative frame. For this reason, it is not easy to assess the intended audience of the book: its title and subtitle do not catch the attention of those interested in Hungarian issues, while others will probably find the unexplained overabundance of Hungarianness somewhat perplexing. A case in point may be János Szávai's paper (*Dream Narratives throughout the Centuries*), which undertakes the audacious task of overviewing (in ten pages!) the role of dreams in the history of "literate cultures" (p. 66). The summary starts with Homer and the Bible and through Dostoevsky, Proust, Thomas Mann, Ismail Kadare and others, it arrives at the two early novels of Hungarian author László Krasznahorkai, which allegedly "synthesise, as it were, the problems of the genre of the novel in the second half of the twentieth century" (p. 73). Many are likely to find the assertions about the endpoints of this history and the significance of Krasznahorkai more contentious than how the essay makes them out, and the study could have benefitted from reflecting on its own perspective and biases.

The essays in this book generally tend to eschew questions regarding points of view and audiences rather than pondering them. As an example, let me refer to the otherwise painstaking paper of one of the editors, Sarolta Osztrólczyk (*The Thicket of Memory: Thomas Wolfe and Géza Ottlik*). Its subject matter seems unproblematic if we look at it from the vantage point of the Hungarian milieu, where the works of Géza Ottlik are held in the highest esteem and have a fairly strong cult following: Ottlik is considered such an important author here that any information concerning the genesis of his oeuvre seems to assume almost automatic significance. In this context, the assertion that Ottlik's classic short story *Nothing's Lost* is in some way connected to the American Thomas Wolfe may be considered an interesting contribution to Ottlikology. Outside this context, however, the relevance of this observation is probably less clear-cut. Osztrólczyk endeavors to prove that the similarities between Ottlik's and Wolfe's stories are not accidental and that Ottlik in fact had read the Hungarian translation of *The Lost Boy* before writing *Nothing's Lost*. By showing how a writer from a semi-peripheral country, who is relatively little-known globally, supposedly created his work by repurposing themes and motifs of a prestigious author from a core country, the paper's argumentation seems to employ and inadvertently reinforce notions regarding the secondary and derivative nature of peripheral literary cultures. Moreover, providing yet another example of

this well-known but not very fortunate pattern is probably not something that will generate any kind of excitement on the part of those who are not interested in Ottlik or Hungarian literature.

The issue of contexts could also be raised with relation to the paper of the book's third editor, Kornélia Horváth (*Three Central European Writers on the Novel: Milan Kundera, Béla Hamvas, Géza Ottlik*). Horváth states that the aim of her study is "to give a short overview on the concepts of the novel in the geographic, political and cultural area called Central Europe" (p. 41). But, surprisingly, the topic of Central Europeanness does not occur again in the paper, and it remains unspecified in exactly what sense this regional backdrop is relevant for the texts analyzed. Furthermore, instead of elaborating on the specificities of the texts and their local context(s), the few interpretative remarks in the study point toward (at times somewhat superficial) correspondences with formulations of internationally respected theorists like Paul Ricoeur and Mikhail Bakhtin. This procedure is probably intended to legitimize the lesser-known theories, but in effect, it seems to strengthen the status of Ricoeur and Bakhtin as authorities, while suggesting that the works discussed are important in so far as they resemble their standards, rather than in their own right. Giving the keyword in the book's title a more prominent role could have helped situate its contributions more productively on the global scene: it could have been the point of departure for specifying the distinctiveness of the diverse Hungarian and Central European literary and theoretical tendencies in nonhierarchical comparison with the network of diverse other traditions. A remark in the introduction points in this way but remains unelaborated:

"The last section [...] invites readers into the intellectual milieu of Central Europe, a geographical area that is often described as an in-between region, 'different from both East and West, a peripheral and transitory zone that is characterized by cultural hybridity and ethical and religious heterogeneity.' The diversity of the region manifests itself even in the academic landscape." (p. 5)

The embedded quote is from Dávid Szolláth.). It would be interesting to study how the diversity of Central European academia compares to other parts of the world, and how (or whether) it is affected by indigenous cultural and religious traditions. This is, however, not a thread the book would later pick up, and the divergence from "East and West" is emphasized far less than the (apparent) similarities. Sometimes differences (and the originality) seem to disappear completely, as in the case of Sára Tóth's paper, which reads Imre Kertész's *Kaddish for an Unborn Child* as an uncannily perfect embodiment of some of Northrop Frye's and William Blake's ideas.

Because of the lack of clarity in its principles, the book comes across as merely a neutral frame helping individual papers get into circulation and be found in searches, and as a whole, it feels less than the sum of its parts. This is reinforced by the somewhat mechanical arrangement of the essays: they are divided into three sections, the third of which contains papers about Hungarian literature, the second papers about English-language works, and the first is a bunch of papers that do not fit thematically into either of the later sections. This order makes it harder to see that despite general arbitrariness, some papers are in at least an implicit dialogue with each other. The most noticeable example is the cluster of three essays that take the contentious relation between narration and description as their central question but are, unfortunately, scattered throughout the three sections. Gábor Kovács's paper (*The Problem of Counterpart and Narrative Parallelism in Prose Language: Jack London's "The Law of Life" and "Morganson's Finish"*) argues for a mode of reading that instead of overemphasizing and reifying distinctions like that between narration and description, concentrates on the way "prose language" links together "narrative, descriptive and personal discourses" (p. 100) to produce a consistent structure. The essay illustrates such links by showing how two short stories by Jack London create their own "internal interpretation" (p. 107) through parallelisms between persons and objects or animals: the presence of wolves and dogs in *Morganson's Finish*, for example, is not accidental, because they are "counterparts" of the protagonist whom the narrator at one point calls "wolfish". This is a very clear argumentation, although perhaps not one that should be used to defend the stories from a potential accusation of didacticism or heavy-handedness.

László Bengi (*Narrative World and Descriptive Power: Ambiguity and Integration in Dezső Kosztolányi's Skylark*) employs the method of Jacques Derrida's early writings to deconstruct the customary hierarchization between narration and description, and to prove by relying on the concepts of worldmaking and thick description that "description 'always already' works in narration and vice versa" (p. 197). This theoretical position both grows out from and informs an innovative interpretation of *Skylark* by Hungarian writer Dezső Kosztolányi, which Bengi reads as a text that itself problematizes the question of "descriptive strategies" (p. 202). Skepticism toward rigorous theoretical demarcations is also characteristic of Tibor Gintli's paper (*Narrative and Speed*), which finds fault with some overly objectivist and dogmatic ideas in Gérard Genette's narratology. Like Kovács and Bengi, Gintli also argues for a more inclusive conception of narration: "if a genre or a text type that forms a distinctive element of a genre becomes part of the narration", Gintli states, "it becomes a narrative element itself because of its new context" (p. 39). From this basis, Gintli argues against Genette's notion that descriptions may be "interpreted as a narrative pause" (p. 39), then goes on to tackle the problem of

narrative speed, shifting the emphasis from the purely quantitative properties of a text (as in Genette) to the event of its reception, and incorporating factors like style, rhetorical devices, or the number of events or actions. While at nine pages long, Gintli's paper is naturally not a full-fledged new methodology; it feels rather like the sketch of one. Nevertheless, it is thought-provoking even at its rougher parts (for example, it would be far from trivial to define such terms as event or action, which are undefined in the essay). These three papers together may truly provoke those readers who think in too monolithic categories to take a step toward diversity and flexibility regarding narratives.

The essays the book starts and ends with may also be seen to belong together. The papers of Mieke Bal (*From "Madame Bovary C'est Moi" to "Emma is Us: Focalisation as Political Tool"*) and Edit Zsadányi (*Hungarian Voices of the Subaltern in the Interruption of Contemporary Narrative Discourses by Krisztina Tóth, Kriszta Bódis, and Agáta Gordon*) are the only two pieces that do not only touch on political topics (like Nóra Séllei's and Angelika Reichmann's papers do regarding the question of interracial desire and violence in Doris Lessing's *The Grass is Singing* or of colonization and the trauma of the Vietnam War in J. M. Coetzee's *Dusklands*, respectively) but explicitly attribute political effects to literature. Bal reads Flaubert's novel as a critique of "emotional capitalism", a system "where commodities are invested with emotion and love is for sale" (p. 20) and argues that its critique is still fully relevant today because this system still dominates. Accordingly, she presents a mode of interpretation that highlights how focalization, which in her view has a "capacity to persuade, manipulate, raise empathy, raise objection, imagine otherness as within us" (p. 29), in the case of *Madame Bovary* "both indicts and transforms the politics of the culture we live in and Emma lived in" (p. 14). Bal's essay is written as a report on the making of a film/installation she created with Michelle Williams Gamaker and consists mainly of reflections on the formal choices that were supposed to reenact the political effects of the narrative devices of *Madame Bovary*. These remarks betray a patient and subtle reading of the novel, but despite its political commitment, the essay feels strangely apolitical with its suggestion that a novel or a video installation are potent counterforces to "emotional capitalism" and "neoliberalism" (p. 29) in themselves, which leads to the disregard of actual practices, the social and institutional contexts, etc. of which the exhibition and reception of such works form parts. Broadly, the same might be said of Edit Zsadányi's paper, which concludes by saying that "the poetics of interrupting the ongoing, in other words, mainstream narration [...] can be understood as a speech act of (political) solidarity that creates the possibility of embracing the marginal and allowing the subaltern to speak within the framework of fiction" (p. 290). Zsadányi gives an attentive reading of some key passages from three Hungarian literary works, but she also ignores the question of

the felicity conditions of the alleged political speech acts, so the chain of mediations between poetics and politics appears to get short-circuited in her argumentation. These questions regarding contextuality and situatedness may seem relevant again since real political effectivity would require custom tactics based on a thorough knowledge of a given field.

Finally, it is also interesting how otherwise very different papers resonate with each other in the space of the book. András Kappanyos's fascinating essay reflects on his and his team's experiences retranslating James Joyce's *Ulysses* to Hungarian. An important point of his report is how vast the knowledge concerning *Ulysses*'s vocabulary, structure, and the text's internal linkages has accumulated over the decades, revealing the shortcomings of earlier translations. A key reference in the essay is to the crowdsourced *Annotations to James Joyce's Ulysses* on Wikibooks. In this light, it is particularly interesting to read in Nikolett Sipos's paper about the "huge online phenomenon" in connection with the fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire* and its TV adaptation *Game of Thrones*: based on "tropes, half-sentences and little hints" "readers all over the world came up with theories about different characters and histories, most of which proved to be true" (p. 157). The two cases of collective information gathering about books seem very similar, on the one hand, and very different, on the other. This reminds me of Rita Felski's argument in her book *Hooked* about how attachment to certain works is determinant both for high-brow and popular literature, for both academic and lay audiences, and that more inclusive methods would be needed to describe in a nuanced way their commonalities as well as their differences. And other such methods would probably be needed to turn the interesting but passive diversity of this book into an effort at an active, attentive, and reflexive understanding of diversity in narration, writing, and beyond.

