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Towards a Course on Central European Literature in Translation

During the fall of 1991, Árpád Göncz, the new president of Hungary, came to visit Toronto for a festival devoted to Hungarian culture. A novelist and translator, Göncz was part of the movement toward democratization in Central Europe. Shortly before his visit I went to Toronto's Metropolitan Reference Library in search of background information about Göncz, whom I hoped to interview. The Robarts Library of the University of Toronto, the city's other important reference library, had none of Göncz's books in its collection, but I knew that the Metro library kept an extensive file of newspaper clippings on contemporary writers.

That afternoon the file drawers were locked, so I headed to the information desk in the literature section, where the librarian offered to open the file. She did not recognize Göncz's name, but I did not expect her to. At the filing cabinet she took out the folder for Hungarian writers. Given the size of Toronto's Hungarian population, I had expected a generous file, but this one was disappointingly thin. She looked inside to find only one article and handed it to me rather proudly. As soon as I saw its headline, I said, "But this is about Vaclav Havel." She did not appear to recognize his name either, so I added, "He's a Czech writer. A playwright. And the president of Czechoslovakia." "You're sure?" she asked. I repeated that I was, to which she said, "Then what's he doing in here?" We looked at each other for a second and I suggested, "Well, I suppose H is for Havel and for Hungarian."

The librarian returned to her desk and I went home empty handed.

THE PLAN

Several months later, Stong College of York University — Canada's third largest university, located in a suburb north of Toronto — decided to offer the undergraduate course I had proposed on Central European literature in translation. Having looked through all of the catalogues of North American universities that I could find, I saw that my course may be the only one offered anywhere. Departments of Comparative Literature listed courses, usually at the graduate level, in the different national literatures that make up Central European literature — Austrian, Hungarian, Czech and Slovak, perhaps Polish, perhaps

Romanian. But these courses generally used books in the original language, not in translation. No department seemed to take the idea of Central Europe and a Central European sensibility seriously, although it has been an important subject, at least in Central Europe. What, then, would North American university students — notoriously uninformed even of their own history — make of it?

The course description I prepared had to suggest an academic rationale while also selling the course. I include it here:

The Quest for Central Europe — Literary Perspectives: The literature of Central Europe has been a powerful comment on events and trends in European history over the past century. In light of recent rapid changes, it is increasingly important to understand this unique cultural and geographic area. Some of the major historical events that have shaped it are the First World War, the rise of modernism, fascism and anti-Semitism, the Second World War and the Holocaust, and the impact of Soviet communism. This course studies Central Europe — past and present — by introducing students to a literature they would not ordinarily study, including novels, short stories, memoirs and letters in translation. (Some current newspaper and journal articles are also read.) Texts are explored in their historical and social context in order to develop an historical perspective as well as a sense of cultural evolution; they are also examined in terms associated with literary analysis. By studying various literary genres, students will also learn to identify some larger issues involved in reading, such as the validity of inquiry through cross-cultural comparisons, the relation of national boundaries to various genres, and questions about studying literature in translation.

Without saying it directly, I planned to explore the notion of a Central European sensibility, of a *Mittleuropa* that was more complex than Viennese waltzes and *Kaffee mit Schlag*, and see how this sensibility was reflected in a culture's literature. I also hoped that the exercise would make my students more aware of the arbitrariness of some of their own cultural assumptions.

THE BOOKS

Every university course is dependent on the books that publishers decide to make available and then to keep in print. Mainstream courses are naturally served with more competitively priced books as well as a greater variety of material — the marketplace is its own kind of censor (a thought worth remembering before any discussion of Central Europe). In addition, English-language translators and publishers have long favoured the secondary languages of international commerce — French, German, etc. — and rarely bring out translations of books by writers from other languages. For example, Péter Esterházy, Hungary's most important contemporary novelist after György Konrád, has long been translated into German, French, Italian, Danish, and Swedish, but into English only in 1991. Selecting only a few male writers, translators have neglected all the significant women writers of Central Europe. This is particularly frustrating at a time when

anyone teaching literary studies will want to include works by women in a new course. Margit Kaffka (1880-1918), one of Hungary's finest novelists, still awaits a sympathetic translator into any foreign language. Her novels, dealing with the plight of women in the patriarchal world of the declining gentry before the First World War, would be of special interest to English-speaking readers.

In making up a reading list I had to accept the fact that I was planning a compromise rather than an ideal course. Fortunately, in the 1970s Philip Roth was General Editor of an excellent paperback series focusing on writers from Eastern Europe, published by Penguin Books. (Although many of these titles are now out of print, some have been taken over by other publishers.) I also tried not to indulge my particular interest in Hungarian writers, although four of the fourteen titles for the course are translations from the Hungarian. But Hungary was, after all, half of the Dual Monarchy. The reading list included:

Timothy Garton Ash, *The Uses of Adversity: Essays on the Fate of Central Europe*
 Peter Handke, *Across*
 Václav Havel, *Letters of Olga*
 Gyula Illyés, *People of the Puszt*
 Franz Kafka, *Collected Stories*
 György Konrád, *The Caseworker*
 Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*
 Zsigmond Móricz, *Seven Pennies and Other Short Stories*
 Robert Musil, *Young Torless*
 Joseph Roth, *The Emperor's Tomb, The Radetzky March*
 Josef Škvorecký, *The Swell Season*
 Andrzej Szczypiorski, *The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman*
 Stephen Vizinczey, *In Praise of Older Women*
 Gregor von Rezzori, *Memoirs of an Anti-Semite*

Just as classes began in September, so did the problems. Although books had been ordered in June, it took the summer for publishers to admit that several of them were unavailable. Robert Musil's classic parable of the rise of fascism was out of print, with no new publisher in sight; Peter Handke's account of the rise of anti-Semitism in modern-day Austria was pending a reprint, as was György Konrád's *The Caseworker*, with no delivery dates in sight. Usually this means that a publisher is collecting back orders, and will later decide whether or not to keep a title in print.

When I heard that Joseph Roth's *The Radetzky March* and *The Emperor's Tomb* were out of print, I saw my course collapsing before me. One of the vagaries of Canadian publishing is that while a small number of houses distribute books for American presses, they often have little interest in selling them. In light of Nadine Gordimer's recent article praising Roth in *The New York Review of Books*, it seemed strange that any publisher would put his most famous novels out of print, so I decided to ignore the Canadian distributor and telephoned the

editorial offices of Overlook Press in New York City. There was plenty of stock in their warehouse, and books were shipped immediately. Since translations of books by Central European writers are seldom considered a priority by the North American publishers who include them on their lists, it is wise to keep a simple moral in mind: Question anything a publisher tells you. Your course depends on your skepticism.

THE STUDENTS: 1

While teaching at Princeton University in 1959, Hannah Arendt wrote to Karl Jaspers that her students "didn't even know that there had ever been such a thing as Austria-Hungary" (375). I had no reason to believe that my students would have discovered it in the intervening years.

Twelve first- and second-year students enrolled in the course. To my surprise, only three had backgrounds associated with Central Europe — Austrian, Polish, and Croatian. And only one, a young woman of Polish extraction, knew her family's native tongue. It is worth noting that North American students of Central European descent often find that their ethnicity is overlooked by their society and even their universities. Two recent studies of the ethnic origins of Canadian students illustrate this point. A University of Toronto survey on race and ethnicity, conducted in the summer and fall of 1991, included in its 35 categories 11 related to European background: British Isles, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Polish, Portuguese, Spanish, Ukrainian, and "Other European," which made up 8.2% of the total student population. Students from Austrian, Czech, Hungarian, Romanian and Slovak backgrounds had to select "Other European" ("University of Toronto"). At York University a similar survey, conducted in the winter of 1991, listed 22 categories, with 14 related to Europe: English, Scottish, Irish, Italian, French, German, Greek, Ukrainian, Polish, Scandinavian, Dutch, Portuguese, "Other East European" and "Other West European" (Found 6). At least York's students had a somewhat wider choice, which in fact posed an interesting political question: does one regard Hungary, for example, as part of Eastern or Western Europe? And what about Czechoslovakia? At any rate, "Other East Europeans" made up 4% of York's student population, and "Other West Europeans" 2%. Both universities listed "Jewish" as a separate category, although most of the students claiming "Jewish background" (3.5% at University of Toronto, 6% at York) probably had ancestors from Russia or Central Europe. These surveys suggest that university administrators are blind to Central European identity — a lack of interest that parallels the attitudes of North American society.¹

During the first class I asked my students to write a paragraph about why they had chosen this course, and their answers covered a wide spectrum. There were, of course, some personal reasons ("As a child I lived in Poland. There is a culture, an atmosphere, a 'pull' which Europe has for me," or, "I find myself bombarded with required courses. I needed a course that was different enough to expand my horizons and which was completely my choice"). Other reasons included the political ("I hope to understand the feelings and emotions of an oppressed people," or, "I am interested in history and politics and this course, although it is essentially an English course, has overtones of each of these interests"), intellectual curiosity ("to stimulate and strengthen my appreciation for literature from all sectors of the world," or, "I am familiar with some American writers, but not as many from Europe"), and the pragmatic ("I was very limited in my choice of courses that fit into my schedule").

When my students wrote another paragraph defining Central Europe, their ideas were more startling. Several offered vague and all encompassing descriptions ("Central Europe would begin around Greece and spread out from there to neighboring countries," or, "All the countries that are located on the main part of Europe, including Germany, Austria, Italy and the former republic of Yugoslavia, yet not including England and other countries detached from the main land"). A few, however, had almost no idea, and included Britain (2), France (1), Germany (4), Greece (3), Ireland (1), Italy (3), Poland (3), Rome (1), the Slovick [*sic*] states (1), Turkey (1), and Yugoslavia (2). "Rome and all the exotic and fascinating places that I've never been," one student wrote, while another confessed, "I think Central Europe includes those countries formerly under the control of the USSR, such as Germany. I had never heard of the term 'Central Europe' before, just 'Western' Europe. Whatever countries it may involve, I have never been exposed to any European literature besides English literature so all of it is new to me." Only two students specified Austria, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, although several thought that Central Europe included countries previously controlled by the Soviet Union. My favorite definition came from the student who wrote, "Such countries as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Germany are considered centrally located within Europe and have very unique qualities." (*Centrally located*, the jargon of a real-estate agent, may not be inappropriate for a region that has seen its borders frequently change.)

region to the Habsburg empire and its ethos (I want to thank Steven Tötösy for directing me to Virgil Nemoianu's provocative essay "Learning over Class: The Case of the Central European Ethos," which examines Central European attitudes towards learning as a key facet of the region's social and cultural ethos). The concept "Central Europe" is also common with writers such as Milan Kundera, whose essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe" reminds readers of the importance of the region's history.

1 Since the end of the Second World War, the term "Central Europe" has largely been replaced in Western writing by the contemporary and political term "Eastern Europe." Timothy Garton Ash's excellent essay "Does Central Europe Exist?" suggests the complexities involved in these terminologies and relates their historical, geographical, and political factors. Following Garton Ash, I use the term "Central Europe" — which has reappeared in discussions of the region since the breakup of Soviet power over it — to suggest the historical connection of the

At first I was surprised by these answers, but I soon realized that I should have predicted them. When I asked about the history courses they had taken in high school, the following list emerged: European history from 1200 to 1940 (1); European history from the French Revolution to the Korean War (1); world history since the Second World War (1); ancient history (3); Chinese and Japanese history (1); American history (1); Canadian history (1); American / Canadian relations (1); Russian and German history (1). In other words, my class of twelve had taken only eleven history courses over a common four-year period — less than one per student. If this sample is typical — and I have no reason to doubt it — these students provide a grim example of what is not being required in North American high schools.

SOMETIMES THE PLAN WORKS

In October 1992, as reports of "ethnic cleansing" increased from the former Yugoslavia, and Western governments seemed paralyzed in their attempts to deal with the worsening situation, the Canadian government held a national referendum about its new constitution. The event was largely reported in the United States as a vote for or against Québec's potential separation from Canada. While Québec sovereignty was an essential element in the referendum, so were the rights of individual provinces, of Canada's native peoples, and other minority issues. As Canada becomes an increasingly multicultural country, the old tensions between its English and French communities often seem irrelevant. At the same time, conflicts between the Québécois and non-English immigrants have grown in recent years, and they usually centre on Québec's language laws, which even prohibit immigrant children from speaking their native languages in local schoolyards.² Along with the referendum, my course's contemporary background included the promises of change that dominated the American presidential campaign, the growing neo-Nazi movement in Germany, and the break up of Czechoslovakia. As the academic year progressed, parallels between the decaying Dual Monarchy at the turn of the century — and its struggles with increasingly vocal ethnic groups — and current events were not lost on my students. History was more interesting than they had expected.

After realizing that the class had a weak background in history, I juggled the reading list to begin with selections from Timothy Garton Ash's *The Uses of Adversity*, and gave an informal two-hour lecture that surveyed a thousand years of Habsburg rule, from the Holy Roman Empire to the final years of the Dual Monarchy. The books became pieces in a puzzle that would be completed only at the end of the course. The class enjoyed Roth's novels and Mórícz's short

stories, mainly because both writers used a realistic style. By the time we finished discussing Roth, students were pointing out similarities between the ethnic conflicts that fuelled the decline of the Dual Monarchy, and the growth of nationalism that accompanied it, with current events in Europe. However, they were more interested in parallels with North America, where racial and ethnic conflict is not yet associated with widespread bloodshed. "The future's pretty clear," one student pointed out. "We're facing a race war." I did not interrupt. "Can't it be avoided?" another asked.

"I didn't think we'd talk so much about war," a student remarked several weeks later. Before I could reply, another student said: "But it's in all the books." He was right, of course. "It's like when we were talking about the referendum," he continued, "and no one thought we'd go to war if Québec separated." I remembered that brief but troubling discussion. Two students had argued that Canada would never send soldiers into Québec because Canadians were a peace-loving people, until another student, a political science major, mentioned a recent conference where several historians had suggested that the idea of war with Québec was not far-fetched. These students were the young men who would fight that war, and the prospect appalled them. "What about military intervention in Serbia?" I asked. "It's the rich old guys who like war," our rugby player offered. "It makes them richer." Before I could ask him to elaborate, he added, "Look at what Roth says." We returned to *The Radetzky March* without any prompting.

Kafka was another matter, and they shook their heads in exasperation at *Metamorphosis* and "The Hunger Artist." Particularly vocal, the rugby player called these stories "dumb and sick." I picked up on his point, and spoke of the spiritual condition Kafka wrote about as a malaise that might indeed be characterized as "sick." Then, when I suggested that we consider Kafka in his historical context, as a Jew resisting assimilation in turn-of-the-century Prague, they began to see his plight. It was a small step from Kafka's sense of alienation to their own, and discussion soon turned to the grim economic opportunities facing them after university, along with their own sense of betrayal. Modernism now seemed familiar. Although few had read Douglas Copland's novel, they knew what Generation X was all about.

THE STUDENTS: 2

Gradually the students brought their own interests to the course, even looking for reflections of themselves in the books. Before the Christmas break, Iza, the young woman of Polish background, said that she wanted to try to read some women writers in Polish, so I recommended several novelists. As I mentioned before, the women writers of Central Europe have not yet been translated, although there is a large body of translated autobiographical writing about the Holocaust by Central European women. While these memoirs have little literary

2 Novelist Mordecai Richler's controversial book *Oh Canada, Oh Quebec: Requiem for a Divided Country* explores these language laws in depth.

merit in the traditional sense of belletristic literature, they are examples of witnessing, with a unique kind of power. I gave a list of them to Iza who decided to present a ten-minute seminar report about women and the Holocaust. To my surprise, the other women students (half the class, in fact) were not as bothered as I was by the course's lack of women writers. Whenever possible we looked at women's lives, and as we developed a picture of this subject during the Dual Monarchy, its relentlessly patriarchal nature became clear, even oppressive.

Since there were no Jewish students in the class, it was necessary to present the Holocaust to people who had few associations with it. Of greater concern was the fact that several students revealed a barely hidden anti-Semitism, while one was quite casual about it, without even recognizing his prejudice. "Jews," he once remarked, "aren't doing badly in the current recession." Without asking him to elaborate, I gave an impromptu talk on scapegoating and the changing legal status of European Jews in the last two centuries. Then, during our next class, I showed Alain Resnais's short film documentary "Night and Fog," hoping that its vivid pictures of Holocaust victims — of people as commodities — would make a strong impression. I rarely use films as teaching aids, preferring to think that books explain themselves if you ask good questions. Since these students came from high schools that no longer emphasize even the most basic historical knowledge, it seemed necessary to show them what horrors people have inflicted on each other in the service of nationalism. And they did find Resnais's images extremely disturbing. Our discussions of Andrzej Szczypiorski's novel about life in the Warsaw ghetto, *The Beautiful Mrs. Seidenman*, took on a new edge, as if the class suddenly felt a stake in the suffering it recounts, and a genuine sympathy for the characters trying to escape it.

AS THE COURSE CONTINUES...

By the end of the first term we had developed a vocabulary for studying Central European literature, a set of concerns that kept arising from one book to another: the idea of Empire, the Emperor, and honour; order, tradition, authority, and convention; patriarchy; the church; the outsider; the Jew; the duel; woman as mother, wife, and mistress; ethnic oppression; language rights; social decay; social change. Rather than exploring the sensibility of Central Europe, we were studying its literature as a commentary on society and politics, as well as the social agendas of various writers. But sensibility and politics began to merge. Aesthetic concerns, such as the way various writers handled the same genre, seemed less compelling than the social dimensions of these books. I saw this as a reflection of the power of books in Central Europe, a power that is difficult for North Americans to appreciate. A culture of visual images — of movies, television, and music videos — has taken over and we can hardly recall a time when novels really counted. And it is inconceivable for us to imagine Gore Vidal, say, or Toni Morrison, elected to political office. We think politics is too important

to entrust to anyone but politicians — a frightening notion if you spend any time with it.

When planning the course, I had intended to hand out newspaper clippings and magazine articles, mostly as background information. These ranged from essays by Vaclav Havel and Milan Kundera, reprinted in *The New York Review of Books*, to straightforward reports of neo-Nazi activities in Central Europe, to Janet Malcolm's *New Yorker* account of a visit to Prague, where she retraced childhood haunts and discovered a common dislike of Kundera's fiction, which many Czechs consider a distortion of their lives that panders to Western intellectuals. As the academic year went on I added to my pile of clippings, for the steady flow of grim news from Europe almost seemed tailored to the concerns of my course.³ Since universities are now more scrupulous about photocopying articles without copyright clearance, I passed out original copies, so that only a few students read the same articles. This actually became an advantage in class discussions, and suited a small seminar course. Yet the first articles were greeted with a blunt question: "Will we be tested on these?" No, I assured everyone, but you still need to read them. Soon the articles elicited curiosity, then enthusiasm — they proved that literature was not simply the study of books written by dead people. And after Christmas break, two students remarked that over the holidays they had explained the history of several current European conflicts to relatives who were impressed by their newly acquired knowledge. In spite of a heavy reading load, four essays and a final exam, the course was paying off. No one had expected it to be relevant.

At times the students joked that I must have foreseen the dramatic changes happening in Central Europe: there were just too many coincidences between the subject matter of the course and the headlines in the daily news. Watching out for the potential dangers of reducing literature to sociology, or to a grand lesson in reading the newspaper, I spoke of metafiction as a genre, and of the blending of historical fact and fiction. Looked at in this context, novels by Roth, Škvorecký, Vizinczey, and Szczypiorski took on a new dimension. Most of the writers we read had set their novels back in time by at least fifty years, and we tried to understand why. For example, Roth's *Radetzky March*, in which Emperor Franz Josef appears on several occasions, falls properly into the genre, but the other novels share some of its characteristics too. I wanted the students to see for themselves that it is possible to use the past to comment on the present, and that in authoritarian regimes the device was often a subversive one. We talked about allegory, which the students found relentlessly unctemporary, until one of

3 Inevitably, political pundits also began to make connections between events in Central Europe and those in Canada. For example, see Jeffrey Simpson's piece, "Four lessons Canada can learn from what used to be Czechoslovakia" in *The Globe and Mail*. My students, who had come up with more "lessons" of their own, were not impressed.

them, who had been able to find a copy of Robert Musil's *Young Törless*, called it "a Habsburg *Lord of the Flies*." Everyone knew that book, and allegory began to make sense. The class concluded that Central Europeans needed allegory more than North Americans, which seemed a wise observation. Allegory, they saw, particularly suited writers in countries where more direct forms of political dissent were heavily censored.

One afternoon, near the end of the second semester, a woman student remarked that the young heroes of the last few novels we had read were obsessed with sex ("they're all horny over there," she said). This led to a discussion of the pursuit of sexual identity as a mask for the inability to claim public or political identity. At first the class ignored my notion that an emphasis on sexual life can be a kind of failure. I decided to let the idea pass. The following week, while discussing Kundera's novel, it came up again. Several students had rented videos of the films based on Vizinczey's and Kundera's novels, and the visual images of love-making brought the point home. I then turned to Janet Malcolm's *New Yorker* article, in which her cousin, a Czech window-washer, attacks the image Kundera has given the West of all Czech intellectuals as sex-obsessed window-washers. "If Vizinczey says they're horny, and Škvorecký says they're horny," one woman student offered, "then maybe Malcolm's got it wrong. Maybe Kundera got it right. Men are just like that." Of course everyone laughed. It was the voice of Generation X — skeptical and world weary. "You sound like one of the characters in *The Emperor's Tomb*," I suggested, thinking of Roth's apathetic young Viennese before the First World War. "But we're not nostalgic about anything," one student insisted, almost proudly. Perhaps she was right. At least she had read Roth carefully.

At our final class I asked the students to discuss a short passage from Timothy Garton Ash: "Central Europe is not a region whose boundaries you can trace on the map — like, say, Central America. It is a kingdom of the spirit" (189). They looked at this passage from several angles, and decided that history is sensibility. If there is such a thing as a Central European spirit, today it may have to be kept alive by writers living outside the region — Kundera in Paris, Vizinczey in London, Rezzori in Tuscany. And what, we thought, was the connection between nostalgia and sensibility? Plagued by an almost deadly nostalgia, and old fears of multiculturalism, Central Europe has been struggling with an identity crisis for most of this century. The region never had time to resolve the psychic wound left by the treaties after the First World War, which redefined its borders, before it faced German occupation, and then Soviet occupation. "But all that suffering made people think," one student argued. Generalizing with abandon, we even wondered if it helped to account for the richness of the region's literature. This notion seemed a hopeful way to end the course.

THE FUTURE

The course is scheduled again for the upcoming academic year, but it will not be a straightforward re-run. I cannot even guess the surprises that various publishers hold in store. Recently the distinguished Czech translator Paul Wilson mentioned that one of the best contemporary German translators was learning Hungarian with an eye to translating some of that largely untapped literature. I found the news encouraging. If my course is to have a lasting life, its reading list will need to metamorphose, a mirror of the shifting realities of Central Europe itself.

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