

Magdalena Brodacka-Dwojak

Dissertation summary: *Central European – the Species on the Verge of Extinction? Identity Narratives on Examples of Czech and Polish Fiction of the 20-th and 21-st Centuries*

The aim of this dissertation is to analyze the phenomenon of Central Europe in Polish and Czech prose after 1945 and to reflect on what a complex Central European identity might be. The thesis asks the following questions: what function does Central Europe play in individual texts and what representations does it assume, in what contexts does it appear, what issues does it raise, and with what metaphors is it described. The writers whose novels and literary essays were analyzed problematize their identity in relation (affirmative or negative) to Central Europe.

The work consists of eight parts: introduction, six chapters and conclusion. The introduction recalls the history of the notion of Central Europe from the 19-th century to the present day, including the state of research in Poland and the Czech Republic. The first two chapters present the beginnings and the so-called proper phase of the emergence of the notion of Central Europe among Polish and Czech writers and dissidents in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. The image of Russia as a colonial empire and the view of reality presented by writers forced to emigrate are important and repeatedly referred to in the context. Chapter one: *Another Europe – An Uprooted Europe? From Family Europe to Central Europe: A Dialogue with Czesław Miłosz* illustrates the evolution of the idea of Central Europe in the work of Czesław Miłosz. It analyzes the poet's key work for this issue, *Native Realm*, as well as numerous articles and statements which appeared in international periodicals and discussions. The chapter discusses problems related to: rootedness (the philosophy of S. Weil), the myth of Atlantis (a way of looking at the West), the Cassandra complex (a way of looking at the East), and the problematic nature of the term Central Europe after the political transformation. In the second chapter: *Agon, Fate or Perhaps Fate? Milan Kundera's Struggle with Central Europe*, there are discussed two works written by the Czech author: *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *The Stolen West or The Tragedy of Central Europe*. This chapter is an attempt to create Kundera's dictionary of Central Europe. There are examined categories such as fate, memory and forgetting, the scapegoat theory (R. Girard), and the metaphorical death of the novel. It also emphasizes the key role of culture in Central European identity in opposition to the dominant historical and political discourse.

The third chapter: *Small World Centres and Their Borderlands. Reclaiming Central Europe in the Work of Krzysztof Czyżewski* describes the breakthrough that occurred in the 1990s as a result of the collapse of the Iron Curtain. Krzysztof Czyżewski points out the goals, hopes, and fears that were associated with this period and the need for a new paradigm of Central Europe to emerge. In numerous literary essays, the founder of the "Borderland of Arts, Cultures, Nations" Center proposes a new Central European lexicon based on concepts such as: borderland, dialogue, small world center, attentiveness, and work ethos. The change of language entails a change of attitude towards the challenges of reality and invites reflection on the vision of the future in Central Europe. The fourth chapter: *Jáchym Topol's and Andrzej Stasiuk's Central European Odyssey, or Identity Neglected*, presents Central European issues after political transformation in Poland and Czech Republic (former Czechoslovakia) in 1990s (Topol's *City Sister Silver*, Stasiuk's *Tales of Galicia*) as well as the challenge of living in "bloodlands" (a concept borrowed from Timothy Snyder's work). In the novel *Carriage* Stasiuk problematizes the notion of history, memory and myth in relation to contemporary Poland. Topol, on the other hand, in *The Vulnerable Man*, describes the migration crisis changing the face of Central Europe and the war in Ukraine, which in the future will affect other Central European countries. Both authors wrestle with the negative Central European identity, that is, the loss of values such as solidarity, multiculturalism, good neighborliness, and sensitivity to the changes of reality.

In chapter five: *Words "Real". Radka Denemarkova's Struggle with Centrality*, there is analyzed Central European trilogy, *A já pořád kdo to tluče*, *Money from Hitler*, and *Kobold*. These novels deal with the violence that originated in Central Europe and is present in contemporary Czech society. In her novel *Hodiny z olova*, the writer transfers the experience of Central European dissidents, especially the vocabulary of concepts and values presented by Václav Havel, to contemporary China, thus proving that the Central European experience can be universal. A similar perspective is presented by Olga Tokarczuk, whose works *Primeval & Other Times*, *House of Day*, *House of Night*, and *The Books of Jacob* are analyzed in chapter six: *An Ex-Centric Tale of Central Europe, or Olga Tokarczuk's Variations on Centrality*. The Nobel Prize winner starts from her personal experience – the place of her birth and her life on the Polish-Czech-German border – in order to describe what the universal experience of the center might be. The center is understood here as axis mundi, home – the center of the universe, and the region of Europe where the multicultural and Frankist movement was born.

These works and the complexity of the subject matter necessitate an eclectic methodology, with particular emphasis on the work of historians and philosophers of Central

Europe and its literature. The dissertation cites the research and concepts of Marci Shore, Timothy Snyder and Ivan Krastev.

The conclusion is an attempt to organize the metaphors used by the above mentioned authors to talk about Central Europe and their identity in relation to it. Throughout the paper, there is a departure from Central Europe as a concept (political, geographical) to emphasize the aspect of becoming a Central European, a process connected with the choice of certain values, an attitude oriented towards the challenges of the future, and the search for hope in a world which is undergoing enormous geopolitical and mental transformations. The war in Ukraine raises questions about where the center of Europe is today, what the European community is, and what pressing challenges are facing today's reborn Central Europe.