

review of: Konstantinović, Zoran/Rinner, Fridrun: *Eine Literaturgeschichte Mitteleuropas*. Innsbruck, Wien, München, Bonn: Studienverlag 2003 (Comparanda 3), 510 pp.

The first thing that occurs to the reader of a book of this kind (and that must have occurred presumably to its authors also) is to raise a question about the very definition of »Central Europe«. There are at least two broad definitions and a narrow one. The narrow one would confine Central Europe to the areas formerly controlled by the Habsburg monarchy. The main disadvantage here is that a number of national literatures would find themselves ruptured, notably the Polish and Romanian ones, but also some other South Slavic and East Slavic ones.

One of the two wider definitions places the area in a mostly western direction, the other one in a more eastern one. Of these two, the former definition has a longer tradition, including the German-speaking lands and perhaps more. The latter one however seems to be adopted nowadays more often and is also the one chosen by Rinner and Konstantinović. In their view Central Europe starts from Austria and Bohemia, includes Hungarian, Slovak, Serbo-Croatian, Polish, Romanian, and even Bulgarian and Ukrainian literatures. In a concession to the more traditional option the authors refer occasionally, or when they deem it appropriate, to German and North Italian authors. Ultimately, and after some hesitation, one may admit that Rinner and Konstantinović were right in structuring the book as they did. Along the way we will encounter some obstacles, as is perhaps inevitable.

Probably one of the strongest points for the argument of the two authors is to be found in the earliest chapters, which are also among the best and the most original of the book as a whole. In these they courageously tackle the issue of the emergence of Central Europe. Konstantinović and Rinner realize that Antiquity and even the Early Middle Ages were unfamiliar with the term and the geohistorical category. They propose as starting point for »Central Europe« the moment when Prague became the center of the German Empire in 1346 under Wenceslas [Wenzel/Václav I.] I and particularly Karl IV [Karel IV] with his two outstanding advisers, Johann von Neumarkt [Jan ze Středy] and Ernst von Pardubitz [Arnošt z Pardubic], a center replaced by Vienna around 1438 under Albrecht II, and more emphatically his cousin, and follower to the imperial throne, Friedrich III who had for a while as chief minister the great humanist and future pope, Enea Silvio Piccolomini. The enabling features include, according to the authors, a collaboration between Latin and Slavic linguistic and cultural traditions, and an originally peaceful coexistence between the Catholic and the Orthodox branches of Christianity. This »humanistic« stage of Central European history culminated with the reign of Matyás Hunyadi [Matthias Corvinus], and his raise of Budapest, most clearly after 1475, as a temporarily leading center of the area. Hunyadi (Corvinus) was a descendant of petty nobility, but his father (probably of Romanian ethnic background) rose as a remarkable military leader, and Mátyas patterned his court consciously after Italian models, either inviting to Budapest or at least consulting with people of high standing such as Bonfini, Ficino, Mantegna, Botticelli, and others of the same order of greatness. Perhaps the only rival of Budapest around the same period was the humanism of Cracow with its brilliant achievements in academics and in architecture. In social terms these and other centers in what came to be called »Central Europe« were comparable to cities over the German-speaking world (from Nürnberg and Augsburg to Lübeck and Bremen), but they differed in being from the very beginning multi-lingual, multi-national, and multi-confessional. (pp. 33-56)

The 15th and 16th centuries enriched the texture of the area by the injection of Protestantism (of which Jan Hus had been one of the notable forerunners), by the influence of the Northern humanism (as opposed to just the Italian one), and by the political squeeze of the two great growing empires: the Ottoman and the Muscovite. It is as a reaction against some of these forces, Konstantinović and Rinner maintain (in chapter II, also e.g. p. 90f.) that »Central Europe« began to crystallize and to gain its identity. Specifically the way in which Vienna regained inevitably its guiding role, the feeling of the need of a common struggle against the alternative civilization advancing from the South, and the birth of a Baroque culture with roots in Jesuit and Counter-Reformation humanism were among the decisive factors in the construction of Central Europe. Names such as those of the Polish poet Jan Kochanowski or the Czech thinker Jan Amos Komenský (Comenius) occur naturally here, but it is extremely useful that the authors also bring up the temporary presence of Martin Opitz in the area, the national epic of Miklós Zrinyi (1651), and in particular the development of a flourishing »Illyrian«



Baroque culture South of the Danube. Even more important is the discussion of the Baroque option in the Southern and Eastern confines of what are now Romania, Bulgaria, and the Ukraine. (The important book of D.H. Mazilu on this topic – Mazilu, Dan Horia: *Barocul in literatura romana din secolul al XVII-lea*. Bucharest: Minerva 1976 – was unfortunately overlooked).

Chapter III (pp. 141-215) brings up the final missing ingredient: the appearance of national consciousnesses which were going to represent in the following 200-300 years the counterbalance to any centralizing or homogenizing tendencies in the geographical area. The authors make two important, though not necessarily original points. The first is that Herder in particular ought to be regarded as an essential ideological and philosophical trigger for the awakening of an awareness of national identity. The second however is that interestingly these »awakenings« or self-constructions seem to have been almost synchronized among the different groups of Central Europe. The consequence was that the literary and intellectual life in this part of Europe witnessed to a much more modest extent the sharp Enlightenment/Romanticism demarkations of Western Europe and instead the Biedermeier style and mentalities were considerably expanded. The 19th century was in fact the golden age of »*Mitteleuropa*«, and I wish the authors had emphasized this more energetically.

On the other hand Konstantinović and Rinner have to be praised for the way in which they consistently cover the whole area. They grant pride of place to Czech, Hungarian, and Polish Romantic literature, as is only fair (pp. 155-170, pp. 189-193). However they have very detailed and observant presentations of developments inside the Slovak, Romanian, Slovene, and Croatian spheres. I would particularly highlight the excellent remarks on the way in which Serbian 19th century literature was rich in connections with or even impulses coming from Vienna (pp. 179-185), as well as the careful selection of Austrian authors (Raimund and Nestroy, Grillparzer and Stifter) relevant to this Biedermeier golden age of Central Europe. Perhaps my only chief disagreement would be the elevation of Nikolaus Lenau into the emblematic figure of Central Europe. Not that the value or visibility of Lenau are not realities. I believe however that it was rather Joseph von Sonnenfels, from his high and influential bureaucratic and ideologic position, from his closeness to the imperial throne, who might be seen as the one who truly outlined a common framework for the whole area, something close to a common denominator for the different ethnic or socioeconomic groups.

The last two chapters are more controversial than the first three, both methodologically and information-wise. Already chapter IV might be subject to some criticism. True, this chapter contains a number of well-formulated defining elements. Thus establishing from the beginning two area-wide features – the validating cultural authority of Vienna and the increasingly important and unifying role of Jews in the intellectual, literary, and in fact social life – was a judicious strategic move in the book's narrative. Not less so was the highlighting of historical fiction in virtually all the languages of the area (pp. 219-234). This broad movement had a number of reasons: national legitimation, the acting-out of inter-ethnic encounters, the cultivation of social and value stability, and, in a few cases (such as Ivo Andrić's later *Bridge over the Drina*; I would have added here some of the writings of the Romanian Gala Galaction) the dialog with other religions and other cultures (Islam). Equally justified in chapters IV-VI are the recurring references to the role of Trieste (e.g. pp. 348-354) and occasionally the contributions of North Italian authors to the region's cultural variety and abundance. More superficial is the discussion of the fascinating dialectic of the fictional and the historiographic; František Palacký and István Horváth are mentioned, but not the equally typical Nicolae Bălcescu; in any case the relationships between imagination and factuality is in these and other cases quite complex and can in no way be summarily dismissed with a statement like: »Die Geschichte wird nun so dargestellt, wie man sich wünscht, dass sie gewesen wäre.« (p. 227)

Well executed is also the transfer from historicism to realism, and major transitional like the Hungarian Mór Jókai or the Croatian Augustin Šenoa are reasonably well analyzed. Yet it is surprising that equally significant transitional figures such as the Poles Bolesław Prus and Henryk Sienkiewicz do not receive a similar treatment, while Władysław Reymont, perhaps the most towering realist of the area as a whole is just mentioned in passing. One misses also any reference to the enormously rich tradition of »*Dorfgeschichte*«, as represented in Austria by Peter Rosegger and Ludwig Ganghofer and abundantly present in all languages, from Trieste to Jassy – this had been after all for many decades an essential part of the time's reading material. Similarly, the case for the centrality of Biedermeier would have been strengthened by



the novelist I.D. Sirbu) or to the post-Kafkians M.H. Simionescu and M. Cărtărescu (the latter is mentioned once, the others not at all). Milan Kundera seems nowadays much less important aesthetically and ideologically than Václav Havel, the stature of Danilo Kiš and György Konrád (pp. 387-400) also diminishes somewhat as time passes. Much of the German-language literature in Romania (Müller-Guttenbrun, Meschendorfer and others, who tend to provide some background for the lyrics of Paul Celan) seems unknown to the authors. More generally the innocent reader would not be able to understand from a reading of the Konstantinović/Rinner history that that the brilliant modernist explosion had as its counter-part a vigorous traditionalist (and retrospective or nostalgic) body of literary work (let me mention just the interesting trilogy of Miklós Bánffy on Transylvanian sociohistorical change before and during World War I). Theological and religious dimensions after the 18th centuries are completely expunged, though they were of some weight throughout the area. I refer not only to religious initiators and thinkers of different religions such as Clemens Maria Hofbauer, Franz Rosenzweig or the Rahner brothers, but to the different priest-authors, or to religious layers of poetic and fictional writing in virtually all languages of Central Europe. The beginnings of modern Slovenian and Romanian literatures, to give just two examples, were marked by indubitable religious factors.

Finally this history does not conclude with a more serious examination of options, if any, for the future of Central Europe. I believe that precisely the cursory and incomplete treatment of the central European cultural-intellectual emigration blocked the authors from debating in greater depth the ways in which Central Europe might integrate into a wider, Euro-Atlantic, but also globalized society, yet at the same time might actually influence such societies and enrich them with its own contributions. The emigres might serve as preliminary models for such an integration and such an impact, with their somewhat encouraging results up to now.

To this series of dissenting observations we may add the highly irritating lack of a name index (which might have avoided different repetitions of names, works, and characterizations), a few errors of spelling, typos, and other small negligences.

This said, the bottom line is that I read the book with great pleasure and profit. It is written in a lively, intelligent, and even-handed manner. It is highly erudite and on the whole well-structured and thoughtful. It defines its domain of research very well and in a very useful way for any present or future scholar or reader. It is compact and convincing. Rinner and Konstantinović deserve our gratitude and our praise for what is, all in all, an admirably meritorious achievement.