

The Tragedy of Central Europe, Forty Years On

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Abstract: Forty years ago, Milan Kundera published “The Tragedy of Central Europe” in the New York Review of Books. My paper considers the role that this seminal essay has played in defining Central Europe as a cultural, political, and aesthetic project in the four decades since its publication. After examining this legacy, the paper concludes by analyzing the dual announcement of the 2018 and 2019 Nobel Prizes for Literature (awarded to Olga Tokarczuk and Peter Handke) as a kind of referendum on the literature—and idea—of Central Europe.

Keywords: Central Europe, Milan Kundera, Olga Tokarczuk, Peter Handke, Western civilization

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Milan Kundera’s seminal essay—“The Tragedy of Central Europe”—is, depending on how you count, either 40 or 41 years old this year.¹ The original, French-language version of the essay appeared in periodical *Le Debat* in November 1983. A few months later, in the early winter of 1984, two English language versions followed; in the UK, *Granta* published it with the title “A Kidnapped West or Culture Bows Out,” while the New York Review of Books published the essay with only the more restrained subtitle from the French original: The Tragedy of Central Europe.²

In any case, however you date the essay, as its 40th birthday approached, it was clear that it was a text whose anniversary was going to be feted. In 2021, a little prematurely, Gallimard published a French reprint of the essay, with an introduction by none other than Pierre Nora, the rector of remembrance himself. An English version of that volume followed in 2023, by which time the renewed relevance of anti-Russian sentiment lent the essay a decidedly prophetic tone. Epitomizing this response, Stephan Auer wrote that Kundera’s “bleak view of Russia remains prescient.”³ Indeed, most of the contemporary reception of the English reprint focuses on this angle—on the rightness or wrongness of Kundera’s exclusion of Russia from the cultural space and civilizational project of Europe. Provocative as that topic is, it is not one that I am particularly interested in adjudicating here. Rather, I’d like to consider how the essay’s conception of Central Europe has weathered the decades since its publication spurred the term’s discursive renaissance in the mid 1980s. At the outset, we should note some troubling legacies. As Timothy Garten Ash has noted, Viktor Orban, when advocating for his own view of the European cultural project, has—on more than one occasion—explicitly instructed audiences to “go read Kundera.”⁴

In light of this, it is somewhat tempting to read the joint announcements of the 2018 and 2019 Nobel Prizes for Literature as somewhat of an unofficial referendum on the question of Central European Literature in the 21st century. To me, this seems to be reflected not just in the biographical facts of the two winners, Olga Tokarczuk from Poland and Peter Handke from Austria—but also in the very terms in which the Prize was awarded. Tokarczuk was awarded the 2018 prize for “a narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life,” and Handke was awarded the 2019 prize for “an influential work that with linguistic ingenuity has explored the periphery and the specificity of human experience.” Even the language of these commendations—“the crossing of boundaries,” on the one hand, and explorations of “the periphery,” on the other—seemed to conjure the discursive space of Central Europe, and to raise questions of its liminality, its

1. I should note that these timestamps are reflective of the fact that this paper was written for the conference “The History of Comparative Literature in Central Europe,” Ljubljana, Slovenia, 5-7 September 2024.

2. This publication history was chronicled by Timothy Garten Ash in “Where is Central Europe Now,” *Substack*, June 23, 2024. <https://timothygartonash.substack.com/p/where-is-central-europe-now>.

3. Stephen Auer, “Review: Rediscovering Milan Kundera’s European Tragedy,” in *The World Today*, Chatham House Publications, March 31, 2023. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/publications/the-world-today/2023-04/review-rediscovering-milan-kunderas-european-tragedy>.

4. Timothy Garten Ash, “Where is Central Europe Now.”



cosmopolitanism, and its specificity. Furthermore, the joint announcement seemed to offer a ready-made political dialectic, as was predictably reflected in media responses. The *New York Times* reported: “Mr. Handke, who is from Austria and whose mother was Slovenian, has espoused nationalistic views, and has publicly expressed doubt about the massacres of Muslims during the Balkan Wars. Ms. Tokarczuk has been a frequent critic of right-wing nationalists in Poland, who have branded her a traitor.”⁵ This statement reveals the extent to which public response to the prize focused primarily on Handke’s support for Milošević, while also unfairly casting Tokarczuk as the Swedish Academy’s political alibi—a mollifying, token progressive to soften the shock of Handke’s politics.

This paper challenges this discursive response in several ways: firstly, it shows how Handke’s response to the dissolution of Yugoslavia was a direct extension of his critique of Kundera’s invocation of Central Europe. It then examines the failures of *both* Handke’s and Kundera’s political legacies. Finally, it turns to the possibilities of Tokarczuk’s prose, and argues that her work offers a more durable and more defensible contribution to the discourse on Central Europe than either of her predecessors.

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The relationship between Handke’s literary output and his political stances is controversial. For the majority of Handke’s defenders, this fault line doubles as the first line of defense, and many have argued that he was deserving of the Nobel for his “linguistic ingenuity”—not for eulogizing Milošević. But the wording of the prize announcement also specifically invokes his “exploration of the periphery,” and I’d argue that in so doing, it at least implicitly gestures toward his excursions into the periphery of European liberalism. This dimension was indeed emphasized by Henrik Petersen, a member of the Nobel Prize Committee, who responded to the outrage over Handke’s Nobel with an op-ed in *Der Spiegel* that explicitly defended Handke’s political position on Yugoslavia, citing Handke’s “fundamentally anti-nationalist stance.”⁶ Petersen goes on to examine the nature of Handke’s relationship to Serbia, which is also the focus of most political examinations of Handke.⁷ But I’d like to focus on the issue of Handke’s connection with Slovenia, which of course by virtue of his own heritage and upbringing served as the most proximal point of exposure to Yugoslavia. It seems to me that the nuances of Handke’s connection to Slovenia—and particularly his involvement in the discourse about Central Europe—deserve greater attention.

Yet before examining Handke’s own incursions to Slovene public discourse, I should perhaps set the scene by accounting, briefly, for his Slovene reception more broadly. There was a brief time—especially immediately after the publication of *Repetition* in 1986—when Handke was seen as a champion of Slovenia, and he was in fact awarded the Vilenica Prize⁸ the next year, in 1987. Thus, there are moments in this history when Handke’s Koroška is celebrated with the same vigor applied to Hemingway’s Karst—and indeed, these two foreign authors, at opposite ends of the 20th century and opposite ends of the Soča River Valley, did, in a sense, write Slovenia into their own respective literary traditions. But I think it is fair to say that, in Handke’s case, this flicker of enthusiasm is generally eclipsed by subsequent scepticism. There is, of course, a long and troubling tradition of German authors essentializing their Slavic neighbors. And when, in the novel *Repetition*, Handke describes the Slovene national essence as “compliant, willing, undemanding, the nature of a people who had been kingless and stateless down through the centuries, a people of journeymen and hired hands (not a noble, not a master among them)”⁹ he comes uncomfortably close to Herder’s 1784 take on the “slawische Voelker” as “charitable and hospitable to excess, lovers of pastoral freedom but submissive and obedient...for as they were never ambitious for sovereignty, they had among them no hereditary princes addicted to war.”¹⁰ Adding to ballast of this 200-year-old trope was Handke’s own complicated relationship to Slovenia and Yugoslavia. While the Slovene Hemingway retains a kind of mythical purity (and, indeed, Hemingway never set foot in Slovenia), Handke’s own mixed heritage was compounded by his fragmentary exposure to Yugoslav life, by his self-proclaimed status as “ein Halber.”

So it was against this backdrop that, in the turbulent fall of 1991, Handke published *Abschied des Träumers*

5. Alex Marshall and Alexandra Alter, “Olga Tokarczuk and Peter Handke Awarded Nobel Prizes in Literature,” *New York Times*, October 10, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/10/books/nobel-prize-literature.html>.

6. Henrik Petersen, “Stellungnahme von Henrik Petersen, Mitglied des Nobelpreiskomitees,” *Der Spiegel: Kultur*, October 17, 2019. <https://www.spiegel.de/kultur/literatur/peter-handke-stellungnahme-akademie-mitglied-petersen-a-1292062.html>. Original: “Kurzum – schon früh in seiner Schaffen sprach Handke sich unmissverständlich für Frieden und nicht für Krieg aus, und er vertritt einen grundlegend antinationalistischen Standpunkt.”

7. See, for example, a recent essay in *The New Yorker*, in which Ruth Franklin explores Handke’s “obsession with Serbia” in various examples of his writing. Ruth Franklin, “Literature’s Most Controversial Nobel Laureate,” March 14, 2022. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/03/21/literatures-most-controversial-nobel-laureate>.

8. The Vilenica International Literary Festival (*Mednarodni literarni festival Vilenica*) was founded in 1986 and awards an annual prize for Central European Literature; it is worth noting that this paper was written for an academic conference that was held in conjunction in the Vilenica Festival in 2024.

9. Peter Handke, *Repetition*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Picador, 2020), 95.

10. Cited in John P. Sydoruk, “Herder and the Slavs,” *AATSEEL Journal* 13, no. 3 (1955): 71–75.

vom neunten Land (A Dreamer's Farewell to the Ninth Land).¹¹ The text is personal and political by turns, and spins elliptically from Handke's own private Slovenia to the Slovenia on—or, as the case may be, off—the map. A hovering reference to Hofmannsthal's *Lord Chandos Letter* seems to raise the prospect of language breaking down in the ether, and yet when Handke comes to ground, and addresses the political discourse swirling around Slovenia at the time, he lands hard. He writes:

"For a long time, I took the increasing drifting away of so many Slovenes from their big Yugoslavia, 'towards Central Europe,' or 'to Europe,' or 'to the West,' to be a mere whim. But then I began to hear more and more...from acquaintances, but also from complete strangers, on the streets and bridges of Ljubljana or Maribor, where the rivers flow as they do on the Danube in Belgrade, that the Slovenians and Croatians should build a 'Wall' against the Serbs, the Bosniaks, etc., higher even than the one in Berlin—which was still there at the time—'two floors up!' And whenever I would ask for the reason why, the answer would creep up on me with dumb familiarity: 'The people down there don't work; the people in the South are lazy—they take apartments away from us in the North—we work, and they eat.'"¹²

For Handke, the claim that Slovenia was a part of Central Europe was always characterized by this exclusionary and discriminatory dimension. In his view, the concept of Mitteleuropa only served as a mechanism for separating the land it described from the East and from the South—to distinguish itself from the supposed civilizational backwardness of what [he termed] the "Grenzacht-Zeitungen" (the Border Patrol Newspapers) would call "der Balkan." In fact, he objects to the usage of "the Balkans" in any sense, claiming:

"Nowhere in Bosnia and Herzegovina, nor in Kosovo, travelling on foot, by buses and trains, did the *Schlägerwort* (bullying buzzword) [of 'the Balkans'] ever cross my mind, let alone my lips. When it came to such slogans, if, for example, the Serbian intellectuals from Beograd had to be described, [then it could only be as] the twins of their colleagues in Paris or New York, so telepathically connected are they with the theory du jour..."¹³

He goes on to list several examples of South Slavic intellectual verve and cosmopolitanism, examples which he offers in a spirited attack on the civilizational snub that he always hears lurking behind the term "the Balkans." He adds: "How tragic, and also outrageous, that even today someone like Milan Kundera, a few weeks ago, in *Le Monde*, would call for 'Saving Slovenia' together with Croatia—for walling it off from the Serbian 'Balkans' and blindly lumping it in with some spectral 'Central Europe' (Zentraleuropa)..."¹⁴

The publication of "*A Dreamer's Farewell to the Ninth Land*" created a predictable scandal in Slovenia, where a variety of public intellectuals volleyed back defenses of Slovenia's inclusion within Central Europe. These figures mostly coalesced around the journal *Nova Revija*, which had first published a Slovene translation of "The Tragedy of Central Europe" in 1984, and featured Kundera prominently throughout the 1980s. When, in January 1987, "Nova Revija 57: Contributions for a Slovene National Program" set out an agenda for Slovene independence, it explicitly drew connections to other "small Central European nations"—namely, Czechoslovakia and Poland—as a source of legitimacy for their claims to national independence. Thus, within this discourse community, Slovenia's ascension to Central Europe not only heralded a claim to cultural identity but also to political legitimacy.

Of course, Handke went on to engage in polemics about the dissolution of Yugoslavia for the better part of three

11. This is a literal translation, but the spirit of this title we could perhaps capture more accurately as "A Dreamer's Farewell to the Land Far, Far Away". (I should explain that this latter phrase—the Ninth Land—is a calque of the Slovene "Deveta Dežela"—a fairytale-ish term that conjures a specifically Slovene folklore tradition and the mythical distance of "once upon a time").

12. Peter Handke, *Abschied des Träumers vom neunten Land: Eine Wirklichkeit, die vergangen ist: Erinnerung an Slowenien* (Suhrkamp, 1991), 38. My translation. Original: "...Das zunehmende Wegdriften so vieler Slowenen von ihrem großen Jugoslawien, 'hin zu Mitteleuropa,' oder 'zu Europa,' oder 'zum Westen,' nahm ich lange als bloß Laune. So hörte ich immer öfter, und jedesmal seltsamer berührt, von Bekannten, aber auch von Wildfremden, auf den Straßen und Brücken von Ljubljana oder Maribor, wo die Flüsse wie je auf die Donau in Beograd zuströmten, Slowenen und Kroaten sollten an den Südgrenzen eine 'Mauer' gegen die Serben, die 'Bosniaken' usw. errichten, höher noch als die in Berlin—es gab diese da noch—, 'zwei Stockwerke hoch!' Und wenn ich nach den Gründen fragte, beschlich es mich dumm-bekannt bei: 'Die unten arbeiten nicht—die im Süden sind faul—nehmen uns im Norden die Wohnungen weg—wir arbeiten, und sie essen!'"

13. Ibid., 26. My translation. Original: "Nirgends in Bosnien und der Herzegowina, auch nicht im Kosovo, zu Fuß unterwegs, in Bussen und Zügen, kam mir jemals dieses blödsinnige Schlägerwort in den Sinn, geschweige denn über die Lippen, ginge es um dergleichen Parolen, müßte man zum Beispiel die serbischen Intellektuellen aus Beograd geradezu als die Zwillinge ihrer Kollegen in Paris oder New York bezeichnen, so telepathisch sind sie mit diesen verbunden in der jeweiligen Theorie des Tages..."

14. Ibid., 28. My translation. Original: "Wie traurig, und auch empörend, wenn jemand wie Milan Kundera noch heute, vor ein paar Wochen, in einem von *Le Monde* veröffentlichten Aufruf zur 'Rettung Sloweniens' dieses, zusammen mit Kroatien, vom serbischen 'Balkan' abgrenzt und es blind jenem gespenstischen 'Zentraleuropa' zuschlägt..."



decades, and his support for multiethnic Yugoslavia morphed rather inexplicably into support for Milošević's war crimes. Here I must echo the disclaimer made by Henrik Petersen—the Nobel Committee Member—that certain of Handke's statements are perhaps a type of "political kamikaze maneuver," but are, in any case, indefensible. However, 30 years on, his general take on the discursive function of Central Europe—which, as we've seen, he diagnosed as a term of exclusion, with an embedded claim to civilizational superiority—is worth considering.

To return to Kundera's essay for a moment, we should note that he both begins and ends with the image of the director of the Hungarian News Agency during the 1956 Uprising, who, under fire from Russian artillery, proclaims to the world: "We are going to die for Hungary and for Europe."¹⁵ In Kundera's account, "Central Europeans," despite their lack of recognition from the West, are saving Europe from "an attack on their civilization."¹⁶ He explains that "the deep meaning of [Central European] resistance is the struggle to preserve their identity—or, to put it another way, to preserve their Westernness."¹⁷

In July 2020, in an event titled "Europe Uncensored," which was convened to mark the 44th anniversary of the European People's Party, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban began by resurrecting the tension between central and Western Europe, stating: "We Central Europeans should ask the Westerners: 'Please don't tell us how we have to live our lives.'"¹⁸ He went on to denounce the Western attempts at inclusive social policies, complaining that Western lawmakers "promote multiculturalism, they are pushing forward pro-migration policy, they follow an anti-family policy, they want to get rid of the concept of nations and nation states, and they consider irrelevant the Christian social teachings."¹⁹ Janez Janša, the political boomerang then serving as the Slovene prime minister and as Orban's chief ally, concluded the event by calling for a more united front in a "battle for Western civilization."²⁰ In this sentiment, Orban and Janša are every bit Kundera's heirs, as they propagate his conviction that Central Europe is now the sole defender of "Western civilization." So it does seem pretty clear that—despite Handke's other political sins, and there are many—there is at least one sense in which "Central Europe" operates in precisely the way he had perceived, and critiqued, 30 years earlier: not as a harmless nostalgia for a populace that goes to the opera instead of mindlessly watching television, but as a discursive mechanism that invokes a claim of civilizational superiority for the purposes of exclusion and discrimination. And yet Handke's own politics offer no viable recourse. So, the legacies of both sides of the Kundera-Handke debate over Central Europe are bleak; one leads to genocide apology and the other to the ideological foundations of the millennial far-right. But is there another? Can we find another way of recouping Kundera's concept? Can we find a legacy that can stand up to the faultfinding light of the 21st century?

One of the most curious moments in Kundera's essay is when he discusses the predicament of a "famous Czech philosopher" whose sole copy of a manuscript had been confiscated by the authorities. He writes:

"We talked about the possibility of sending an open letter abroad in order to turn this confiscation into an international scandal. It was perfectly clear to us that he shouldn't address the letter to an institution or a statesman but only to some figure above politics, someone who stood for an unquestionable moral value, someone universally acknowledged in Europe. In other words, a great cultural figure. But who was this person? Suddenly we understood that this figure did not exist. To be sure, there were great painters, playwrights and musicians, but they no longer held a privileged place in society as moral authorities that Europe would acknowledge as its spiritual representatives."²¹

What is curious about this anecdote is the accompanying footnote, which clarified that "At last, after hesitating, [the philosopher] sent the letter after all—to -Paul Sartre." And Kundera recounts how Sartre did in fact issue a statement in *Le Monde*, which did result in the return of the confiscated work to the philosopher. But he concludes the footnote by doubling down on the anecdote's punchline: "On the day Sartre was buried, the memory of my Prague friend came back to mind: now his letter would no longer find a recipient."

My point here isn't to call out Kundera on his elision of historical facts for dramatic effect; he's a novelist, he comes by that honestly. Rather, I'm interested in the level of his investment in this anecdote, in how staunchly he doubles down on it, and in how pivotal this absence of moral authority is for his argument. Here, and elsewhere in the essay,

15. Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," *New York Review of Books*, April 26, 1984, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/04/26/the-tragedy-of-central-europe/>.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. As quoted by Lili Bayer, "EPP's illiberal rebels lay out political vision," *Politico*, July 8, 2020. <https://www.politico.eu/article/epp-rebels-lay-out-political-vision-viktor-orban-janez-jansa-aleksandar-vucic/>.

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe."

he is deeply committed to the claim that “no one is coming”—no savior, no Sartre. Arguably the apotheosis of this sentiment comes at the very end of the essay, when Kundera opines, “But if to live means to exist in the eyes of those we love, then Central Europe no longer exists. More precisely: in the eyes of its beloved Europe, Central Europe is just a part of the Soviet empire and nothing more, nothing more.” This divestment of agency is really pretty radical, and arguably a bit overlooked in the critical reception of this essay. The extent to which Kundera self-objectivizes Central Europe, and subordinates it to the Western Gaze—in fact, makes its entire existence contingent upon Western recognition—certainly bolsters the infantilizing Western discursive tendencies that Boris Buden would later incisively and elegantly critique in the essay “The Children of Postcommunism.”²²

But if we return to our Nobel referendum, I’d argue that our other laureate offers us a way out of the predicament of an absent moral authority. In Tokarczuk’s fragmentary novel *Flights*, there are many moments when she approaches a Kunderian ethos of Central Europe. The fragment, for example, in which Frederick Chopin’s heart is, after his death, smuggled back to Warsaw, concealed in a jar under the petticoat of his sister—this is a proper Kunderian moment, focusing as it does on the underappreciated Central European roots of a Romantic virtuoso revered in France. But while Kundera would have focused on Parisian applause, Tokarczuk’s narrative centers on Chopin’s sister, Ludwika, and on her act of smuggling Chopin’s heart, preserved in formaldehyde, past the Prussian border guards, so as to bury it in Poland, in accordance with his wishes. As this fragment suggests, this is a novel deeply concerned with preservation, often in the most literal sense. In that way, it shares a concern with Kundera’s anxiety about cultural preservation in “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” although it dispenses with the question of moral authority quite early on. In another series of fragments, we read the letters of a woman appealing to the Emperor of Austria, Francis I. This character, Josefine Soliman, had a father who had been born in northern Africa, but came to occupy an elevated position in the Austrian imperial court. Yet after his death, because of his race, his body was mummified and “exhibited to curious onlookers at the Prince’s Wunderkammer.”²³ In the novel, we encounter three letters written by Josefine, the daughter, imploring the Emperor to release her father’s body and allow him a proper burial. In the first letter, she makes an appeal based on her father’s social status, noting that “he was in close contact for many years with Herr Mozart.”²⁴ In her second letter, she replaces this tact, via a quotation of the emperor’s predecessor, with a human rights-based approach, arguing that “all people are equal at birth.”²⁵ Yet in the third letter, she abandons all attempts at moral intervention. She is, by this time, suffering from a terminal disease, and in her final missive, she threatens to haunt the Emperor after her death if he does not acquiesce to her request. No longer appealing to an earthly authority, she resorts to a supernatural threat: “I will follow You, my Lord, like a voice from the darkness, even when I die, I will never let You be, never cease to whisper.”²⁶

Whereas Kundera had lamented the loss of a messianic moral authority, in Tokarczuk’s text, it is simply presented as a fact: no one is coming—no savior, no emperor. Do the saving yourself, she seems to say, with whatever tools you have at your disposal. And indeed the characters she presents still find a way to take action within that reality. Ludwika smuggles preserved organs under her dress, while Josefine produces a threat that not even an emperor is in a position to ignore.

In the final image of the novel, Tokarczuk models a pointedly democratic mode of cultural engagement. Whereas Kundera’s impulse had been to summon Sartre, Tokarczuk offers a grassroots, collaborative program of preservation. In the most prosaic of settings—an airport gate, waiting to board—the narrator observes a man taking out his notebook and she too takes out her notebook before addressing her fellow passengers:

“Don’t be shy, I think to the rest, all waiting for our gate to open—take your notebooks out, too, and write. For in fact there are lots of us who write things down. We don’t let on we’re looking at each other; we don’t take our eyes off our shoes. We will simply write each other down, which is the safest form of communication and of transit; we will reciprocally transform each other into letters and initials, immortalize each other, plastinate each other, submerge each other in formaldehyde phrases and pages.”²⁷

In this text, the project of literary preservation is collective, active, reflexive—a mutual-aid effort—one that decidedly does not rely on some kind of external authority. As such, Tokarczuk offers us a vision of cultural preservation that doesn’t require the summoning of Sartre—and sidesteps the conservatism, the elitism, and the exclusion inherent in Kundera’s approach. Tokarczuk also recasts the problem of smallness for Central Europe. We will recall that in

22. Boris Buden, “Children of postcommunism,” *Radical Philosophy* 159 (2010): 18–25.

23. Olga Tokarczuk, *Flights*, trans. Jennifer Croft (Riverhead Books, 2018), 166.

24. *Ibid.*, 141.

25. *Ibid.*, 165.

26. *Ibid.*, 264.

27. *Ibid.*, 401–402.



Kundera's essay, the vulnerability of small nations is perhaps the single defining characteristic of Central Europe:

"What is Central Europe? An uncertain zone of small nations between Russia and Germany. I underscore the words: small nation. [...] But what is a small nation? I offer you my definition: the small nation is one whose very existence may be put in question at any moment; a small nation can disappear and it knows it. A French, a Russian, or an English man is not used to asking questions about the very survival of his nation. His anthems speak only of grandeur and eternity. The Polish anthem, however, starts with the verse: 'Poland has not yet perished...'"²⁸

In Kundera's view, Central Europe is defined by the precarity predicated by its smallness. Of course, from a historical standpoint, this realpolitik reading is a fair assessment—which is perhaps why Tokarczuk's invocation of small nationhood is, by comparison, so striking. In the *Flights* fragment "The Tongue is the Strongest Muscle," Tokarczuk offers a vision in which national smallness is not primarily perceived as a geopolitical weakness. She writes:

"There are countries out there where people speak English. But not like us—we have our own languages hidden in our carry-on luggage, in our cosmetics bags, only ever using English when we travel, and then only in foreign countries, to foreign people. It's hard to imagine, but English is their real language! Oftentimes their only language. They don't have anything to fall back on or to turn to in moments of doubt.// How lost they must feel in the world, where all instructions, all the lyrics of all the stupidest possible songs, all the menus, all the excruciating pamphlets and brochures—even the buttons in the elevator!—are in their private language."²⁹

In this account, the linguistic intimacy afforded small nations is presented—against the dogma of contemporary literary politics—as a certain kind of advantage. In recasting the David and Goliath (or Deleuze and Guattari) dynamics of major and minor language function, Tokarczuk upends common assumptions of linguistic access and prestige, suggesting that speakers of "small" languages retain a linguistic intimacy—perhaps even an access to consciousness—that is distinctly unavailable to native speakers of the global lingua franca. Whereas Kundera had decried the lack of Western recognition—the failure of (the "beloved eyes") of the West to see Central Europe—Tokarczuk frames that same "blindness" as a privation of privacy—a limitation of Western consciousness itself.

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So if we return to our pair of 2018 & 2019 Nobel laureates, we can see that despite the differences in their other political stances, they share a certain resistance to Kundera's approach to Central Europe: both Handke and Tokarczuk reject the idea that Central Europe is charged with protecting "Western culture." While Handke objected to this discourse directly, on the grounds that it Orientalizes "non-Central" Europe, Tokarczuk more obliquely questions the very notion of Western moral authority and literary legitimization. So if we are to think of them as Central European writers, it would perhaps still be prudent to register the ways in which both of these authors distance themselves from the discursive term of Central Europe. For, while Handke explicitly objected to this discourse, Tokarczuk rarely invokes the term of "Central Europe" at all.³⁰

How, then, should we determine the outcome of the Nobel "referendum"—almost four decades after Kundera's essay—on Central European literature? In closing, I'd like to consider the possibility of following Tokarczuk's lead; that is to say, to engage with the tradition of Central European literature without naming it as such. How might we discuss this canon without conjuring competing maps, and their attendant claims of civilizational inferiority and superiority—in other words, to discuss a literature that dare not speak its name?

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28. Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe."

29. Tokarczuk, *Flights*, 176.

30. There are some exceptions to this general trend: for example, she does mention the term on page 26 of *The Empusium*, trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones (Random House: 2024). But in general, it is not a prevalent term in her lexicon.

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