



Anita Starosta. *Form and Instability: Eastern Europe, Literature, Postimperial Difference*

Anita Starosta. *Form and Instability: Eastern Europe, Literature, Postimperial Difference*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016. x, 222 p. ISBN 9780810132023. US \$34.95 (paperback).

Europe – that is, its Western half – continues to represent, by way of its literature, a powerful referent of identity for East Europeans. Anita Starosta’s investigation of the novelists’ forays into the existing Western literary frames of authority suggests that East European writers constantly measured themselves by and against Europe. She selected works, mainly in Polish and on Polish culture, by writers of Czech, Hungarian, and Polish descent, to study Europe and readability challenges. Her urging is vehement: it is important to dislodge European frames of thinking through reading, and its logic of rhetoric, rather than through ties to national context or binaries of self and other. East Europeans should be themselves, even when Europe does not make for an entirely intelligible or legible reality, and even in cases where European values are not reflected or embraced in literary models.

The book is divided into two parts, the first of which traces the new “Frames of Intelligibility” after 1989. Its division is thus conceived so that Starosta can approach her inquiry within the framework of the East Europeans’ ascension to the European Union. She starts with a novel by Tadeusz Konwicki, *A Minor Apocalypse* (1979), to claim that language and truth as well as tropes like allegory, allusion, and irony should be at the core of intelligibility and meaning-making and not an ethical code. Obstacles like the institutional legitimacy of area studies and a frozen hierarchy of knowledge are detrimental to Eastern Europe, due to imperfect formulations and methodologies as well as a focus on political crises and practical issues.

Dislodging discourses that keep East Europeans outside of Europe, through *deixis* (inhabiting Europe and speaking for it from within) might also lead, hypothetically, to the emergence of a new common European consciousness. While examining “The Other” (2006), an essay by Ryszard Kapuściński, she points to a workable model of tolerance that enables a European “we” to emerge. Also, Henryk Sienkiewicz’s novel *In Desert and Wilderness* (1911) is relevant for the book’s argument in that it delineates a white racial identity shared by both East and West.

In the second part, “Conditions of Legibility,” Starosta considers broad cultural imaginaries like modernism, capitalism, and other -isms as shaping the reading of East European literature. The sedimented reading habits and interpretations from previous readers indeed destabilize meaning, text, and context, but they also open up new reading techniques: the

figural (reading novels of marginal countries through their literariness), the context irony, the authorship theory, and the fixed boundaries. We learn that Joseph Conrad was aware of cultural hierarchies and cultural particularities operating in the act of reading. While accent betrays foreignness, the written word is again unstable, thus rhetorical registers of imperialism and pre-modernity help stabilize intelligible frames in Conrad's work. If not read for its literariness, a novel should be read through a cultural or historical frame rather than a national, civilizational, contextual, or ideological one. An ironic textuality with the narrator intervening in the prose also reduces the separateness of Western Europe from its Eastern regions and Russia.

Witold Gombrowicz's theory of "form" that appears in his novel *Ferdydurke* (1937) renders marginal cultures intelligible in the West. Through a direct relation between art and the broader social realm, reading appears like life itself, with each reader trusting that someone else has already examined the greatness of a writer, and here Starosta is brilliant in stating that we constantly delegate the reading experience. Unfortunately, this makes the gap between West and East European literatures shrink once more. Another strategy is to avow one's individuality and independence, and one's human right to assert oneself against abstractions and monuments. Yet, having in the background Europe, and in particular Paris, which is still central to how peripheral cultures define themselves, East European literature seems to hint at inferiority and belatedness.

In the last chapter, the comparison of two dictionaries, one by a French philologist, Barbara Cassin, and the other by Polish theologian Józef Tischner, reveals Poland's equal claim to giving European philosophy and knowledge its very foundations. In her multilingual work, which has been translated into English, Cassin attempts a repositioning of her country as a great power, but, unwittingly, her assumption of equality between West and East in respect to knowledge and intelligence has only deepened the divide within Europe. Another difficult translation is Józef Tischner's *Historia*, read on the background of the Góral community and its geographical, linguistic, and even existential claims within Poland. For Westerners and the unaccustomed Poles, his work is untranslatable and unreadable.

There emerges from this well-documented discussion of book reading strategies a timely analysis of the political and academic stakes involved in the writing and reading of literature within and across Europe. For the literary historians of book reception, intellectual historians, and theorists, this book is a stimulus to future research on the fascinating place of Europe in



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the East European intellectual imaginary. The Polish writers reflecting on Europe fit into a general twentieth-century phenomenon happening in the Eastern region as a whole. Yet, we may wonder at the perseverance of Polish intellectuals in seeking to understand Europe or to come to grip with the European component of their identity when they have already been fully entrenched in European thought and religious society abroad and at home, which, it seems, they never left.

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