

MILOŠ ZELENKA: Central Europe in Symbolic and Literary Geography

Berlin: Peter Lang, 2024. 176 pp. ISBN 978-3-631-90699-6; DOI 10.3726/b21812

DOI: 10.31577/WLS.2025.17.1.15

© Institute of World Literature

Slovak Academy of Sciences

© Agnieszka Janiec-Nyitrai 2025

Licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

One of the main research fields of Miloš Zelenka, professor of Slavic literatures at the Institute of Languages and Cultures of Central Europe at Constantine the Philosopher University in Nitra, Slovakia, is comparative literary studies within the context of Central Europe and interliterary communities. His latest monograph, *Central Europe in Symbolic and Literary Geography*, aims to present Central Europe in light of the transformations taking place in contemporary culture. Zelenka draws attention to the changing understanding of key categories such as identity or national stereotypes, seeking to demythologize the region and present it without unnecessary idealization – a tendency often found in analyses, for instance, of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, frequently depicted as the center of the region. The publication provides a critical examination of Central European culture, aiming to demonstrate that the region, due to its unique geographical position, remains an important element not only of European but also world culture.

Zelenka's monograph consists of eight chapters, complemented by an introduction and conclusion. The author's main objective is to present the phenomenon of Central Europe in all its complexity and multilayered nature, analyzing specific literary works, intellectual debates, the processes of idea formation, and the mechanisms of the adoption of concepts from different cultural centers. Zelenka employs a clearly defined methodology, drawing from the achievements of literary comparatistics, theories of interliterariness, and global impulses from fields

such as literary studies, literary history, sociology, political science, etc.

The first chapter, titled "Central Europe as an Issue in Comparative Literary Studies", provides a deep insight into the complex structure of the region in terms of culture, history, and language. As Zelenka states: "Central Europe in symbolic and literary geography (as stated in the title of this book) represents a mobile and heterogeneous space full of traditions and symbols, nourished by names and concrete stories that link this 'intangible' landscape into one sensitive and artistic ensemble. It is not just the spatial properties of literary texts but a complex, semantic 'network' of intertextual and intercultural relationships and contingencies between the author and his production; a network that is tied to such an autonomous space, regardless of whether we view it from a real, physical, mental, or spiritual perspective" (13). Zelenka also focuses on the region's distinctive characteristics that shape its unique nature. His perspective is broad and includes reflections on the social, religious, political, and cultural situation: "a relevant characteristic of Central Europe is the diversity and interpenetration of peoples, cultures, religions, languages, institutions, and traditions of thought. From the perspective of 'ordinary' people, immersed in their ethnic 'code', these elements create instability and identity problems" (16). By tracing the fates of specific writers, poets, and intellectuals (e.g., Czesław Miłosz, Milan Kundera), Zelenka aims to identify how the region of origin influences the formation of attitudes, decisions, or the choice of language for literary communication.

The second chapter, titled “Central Europe from the Point of View of ‘Ingressive’ Literary History and the Conception of the So-Called Cultural Saints”, introduces the so-called ingressive method of literary history, based on historical-geographical modelling. Zelenka raises crucial questions about the position of the writer/poet in Central European culture and shows the mechanisms of canonization. The focus is not on the individual fates of specific writers, but on the broader processes that lead to them becoming symbols and being elevated to a pedestal.

In the third chapter, “Central Europe from an Imagological Perspective”, Zelenka proposes an imagological approach to analyze the representation of the “other” or “stranger” in Central European thought. The category of the “other” offers numerous interpretive possibilities, which the author uses holistically, showing, for instance, the creative tension between different nations and the ambiguous relations between them. He states: “the Central European interliterary area forms a poly-literary historical system deriving from a number of plurilingual, multi-ethnic formations” (48).

The fourth chapter, “Minimalist and Maximalist Conceptions of Central Europe (Principles of Interliterary Communication)”, is devoted to two contrasting conceptions of Central Europe. By juxtaposing these differing approaches, Zelenka sheds new light on the extraordinary wealth of possibilities for capturing the diverse and rich culture and history of Central Europe. He meticulously examines the conceptions of Central Europe in each country, explaining why they took the form they did, citing political and historical factors.

In the fifth chapter, “Central Europe as a Cultural Notion (For Intellectual Discussion)”, the author presents an overview of the debate surrounding Central Europe, which was initiated in the 1980s by Milan Kundera’s famous essay *The Tragedy of Central Europe* (1984). Zelenka summarizes Kundera’s main themes: “Central Europe, with its imaginary boundaries and movable frontiers, falls

short of the true centre, for the division into the West and the East results in a subjective loss of togetherness and common ‘Central European’ awareness. In Central Europe – ‘the small-scale model of Europe’ – it is the whole of Europe and its cultural heritage that have always been defended” (69). He provides a lucid account of the course of the debate, which involved some of the greatest intellectuals of the time, highlighting the pivotal moments in the discussion, and shows that the concept of Central Europe evolved dynamically.

The sixth chapter, “Archetypes in Interliterary Communication”, focuses on stereotypes operating in Central European culture and their selected realizations. Zelenka uses the concept of interliterary communication to trace the journey of individual archetypes and stereotypes. He focuses on the myth of the Danube River and the nostalgic myth of the Habsburg monarchy, and reflects on how these myths were formed and why they remain relevant to different nations of Central Europe. In the following chapter, “The Phenomenon of Central European Centristism”, Zelenka examines the changes within the center/periphery system, which embodies a dynamic model of a polycentric and multicultural space, always in motion and susceptible to change both from within and without.

The final chapter, “Central Europeanism as a Way to Worldwide ‘Reputation’”, reflects on the distinctive features of Central European writing. Using specific writers and their works as examples, Zelenka attempts to model the exceptional artist whose works have a real chance of entering the global literary canon. The analysis is accompanied by an exploration of the unique features of Central European writing, characterized by a preference for the grotesque, irony, and subtle satire.

Due to its dynamic and open character, Zelenka’s *Central Europe in Symbolic and Literary Geography* establishes new directions in the study of Central Europe, and contains many thought-provoking, though sometimes

debatable, reflections. It demonstrates that Central Europe functions as a litmus test, reacting to the smallest changes in European culture. Zelenka's monograph is an essential academic work not only for scholars engaged in Central European studies, but for anyone interested in the paradigm shifts in the culture of the region. This publication by Miloš Zelenka offers fresh insights into contemporary literary comparatistics and literary studies, advancing research directions in these fields. It presents innovative ideas and intellectual stimuli, making it a valuable resource for scholars and readers interested in the his-

torical and ongoing developments of Central European literatures. It also serves as a significant catalyst for examining the evolving perception of Central Europe, particularly in the context of contemporary challenges and complexities.

AGNIESZKA JANIEC-NYITRAI
Institute of Slavonic and Baltic Philology
Department of Slavonic Studies
Faculty of Humanities
Eotvos Lorand University in Budapest
Hungary
jannyitrai@caesar.elte.hu
ORCID: 0000-0001-5292-6866