

The Central European path to worldliness from the point of view of so-called small literatures

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31577/WLS.2023.15.1.7>

Current debates on world literature (by Emily Apter, Pascale Casanova, David Damrosch, Marko Juvan, Franco Moretti, Haun Saussy and others) frequently single out the fact that world literature, or a text aspiring to be designated as such, is closely correlated with the country's prestige (including its size) and the universality of a generally recognized language, determined by global and economic factors rather than purely aesthetic ones. Notwithstanding the indisputable dominance of major literatures in reception and media presentation, world literature also covers "small" literatures (Pospíšil 2020, 103–104) whose "worldliness" is based on the particularity of the "regional" or the "local"; in other words, it is not only the force of extraliterary prominence that matters but the very efficiency of literature to constitute a world through anesthetizing national images. The way to "worldliness" is hampered here, for the authors of "small" literatures cannot neglect the factor of globalization and the extent of a language's distribution. Yet at the same time, they have to accomplish something additional, a kind of added "surplus value" consisting in the presentation of the "national" as a specific stamp of "worldliness". This is what the Czech author Karel Čapek surmised in his essay "Jak se dělá světová literatura" (How to write world literature, 1936), when he reflected, like his predecessor Goethe a hundred years earlier, on the potential chances of authors in "small" literatures to achieve world renown. According to Čapek, it can never be "imitating" or "catching up with" great authors, but our conscious identification with the condition that "what we like best about them is just the non-transferable, what is solely theirs, in the vernacular and empirical sense" (10). Admittedly, the status of worldliness may even be attained by texts parading themselves as "fashionable" (enjoying present-day popularity with readers) or maintaining "historical topicality" (universal or socially committed works). Their world status, however, must be most distinguished and most permanent, which is achieved only through "clearly and utterly" national texts that express "the soul and character, the type and life of their country and people" (10). As a young author before the World War I, Čapek realized that the modern concept of nationality cannot be exclusively connected with local themes, like a portrayal of the nation's

Part of Anna Zelenková's paper is included in the completion of the project APVV-19-0244 "Metodologické postupy v literárnovednom výskume s presahom do mediálneho prostredia".

own history (1913, 160); rather it consists of the authorial approach which reacts to the “world” and that can be conveyed by the motto “no lagging behind the moving mankind, but joining it in the frontline” (162).

The following study uses the authors Ivan Horváth, Karel Čapek, Sándor Márai, and Witold Gombrowicz as exemplary of the endeavor (with varying degrees of success) to gain a world readership through their “Central European quality”, along with describing the “structural mechanisms” used to fulfill this ideal aim. In order to show more general developments, the authors have purposely chosen Slovak, Czech, Hungarian, and Polish texts which are representative of the Central European area rather than singular literary trends, which may be more important on a national level but are irrelevant within a broader perspective. In terms of time period, our research is focused on the first half of the 20th century, considering it crucial in the development of Central European literatures, as well as the time when individual literatures had been “solidified” in the wake of the National Revival. It was the same period that witnessed the fruitful assimilation of Western literary inspirations, principally of French, English, and German origin. These impetuses were not received mechanically, but enriched and changed by these authors with regard to the specific cultural, social, and political conditions in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Poland, being adapted to the local cultural needs.

This article explores how the original national impulses returned to a wider European context, changing, developing, and transforming in the meantime. Thus, the literary historical development of Central European literatures between the wars drew upon the unified multicultural tradition of the dismembered Habsburg Empire, itself based on national specifics rigorously particularizing themselves and constituting unique aesthetic and thematic structures and phenomena (the grotesque; the absurd, irony, skepticism, etc.). Central European authors were intensely aware that the exceptional proportionality of global “unity” and national “otherness” implied different conditions of intertextual and intercultural transfer which constituted specifically local “mechanisms” important for the perception of world literature. Another contributing factor was the Central European intellectual atmosphere at the intersection of diverse streams of thought, particularly the phenomenon of migration and social mobility in the multilingual empire, which provided fertile ground for polyglossia and heterotopia (Zelenka 2022, 8–9).

While Čapek is attractive because of his universal humanistic ideas reflecting his apprehension over threats from modern civilization, Gombrowicz addresses the modern reader through an intuitive anticipation of the postmodern grotesque, rendering the tension between the external and the internal and demonstrating the tragic disintegration of a human being. Similarly, Márai questions the entropy of traditional Western structures in Central Europe under pressure from the East, and like Horváth, he seeks artistic inspiration for his dreamlike visions in French culture. Despite their genre and thematical differences, and while each of them managed to develop an individual style, these authors are united in their affection for the West which influenced their Central European “destiny”, namely respect for cultural diversity and dissimilarity. It is this conception of notional, political, cultural,

and philosophical heterogeneity that along with the openness and multiformity pervading all of their works gives them a “world-class” level of excellence.

Together these authors demonstrate that in the autochthonous “interspace” of values between the West and the East, a “pure” national literature exempt from synthesizing a foreign heterogeneous element does not exist. Metaphorically, each of them appears to be an individual thoroughly mastering the codes, styles, and language of Western culture, someone who can integrate impulses from other backgrounds, incorporating them in their own artistic creations. Moreover, they can offer something unique and attractive from their personalities to fill the empty space, something that will fit in the structure of world literature. Of course, this fragment or fraction of world literature is inadequate to represent the whole of a national literary tradition (Czapliński 2014, 37). This raises the question of what in national literature might be attractive enough to join the international literary circulation: what factors affected the penetration of these ideas and thoughts, and what particularly influenced the process of absorbing these Central European ideas and notions? What resounded enough within world literature in a particular moment to join it permanently, and what remained unnoticed?

For any literary work to align itself with world literature, it must pass through several stages. The Polish scholar Przemysław Czapliński illustrates the sequence of these procedures through the integration of Polish literature into the French literary sphere: it starts with a good French translation, followed by a positive French critical reception, confirmed by a similarly affirmative acceptance among French readers (24–25). Obviously, there are other factors to increase public awareness, such as the book's edition in a prestigious publishing house, positive reviews from scholars and other acclaimed authors, a successful staging of a dramatic text, etc. (Mikołajczak 2021, 401–402). If one of these phases fails, the opportunity is wasted. Only if these essential prerequisites are met, the literary work can enter the French awareness, which naturally does not mean that it will belong to world literature. The same process has to occur collaterally in the French and, above all, English surroundings, so that the text can penetrate into the American literary ambience. In this respect, a remarkable context for our thought is provided by the works of Franz Kafka, the Central European author who obviously became a globally acclaimed writer because he wrote in his native German tongue, even though he lived and worked in the Czech city of Prague. A rather different strategy for penetrating into the international literary process was implemented by Milan Kundera, who, having emigrated to France, consciously shifted to using French as the language of his essays and later fiction, cementing his status as a European and world writer. The Slovenian scholar Marko Juvan, in his monograph *Worlding a Peripheral Literature* (2019), uses the term “worlding” as a free translation for “literature affected, or influenced by the world” (3–4). In order to achieve success, works written in small Central European literatures have to reduce the difference of values between the dominant “center” and the dependent “periphery” both aesthetically and thematically. It was when Central European literatures, or rather their texts, joined the world literary area that they respected the hegemonic centers of political power in the West of their own free

will. Thus, on the one hand, the incorporation into worldliness has been legitimized by criteria derived from the Western canon (Gáfrik 2020, 117–118), and on the other hand, it should be accompanied by a cumulation of subjective criteria such as media publicity, the reader's interest in a particular author or genre, interpretational presentation, a reading tradition, etc. Regardless of Juvan's conclusion that it is necessary to reconcile with the historically-given inequality as a result of the axiological and aesthetic paradigm of world literature (2019, 40; Pokrivčák and Zelenka 2020, 182), there is the proximity of Dionýz Ďurišin's thesis that world literature has its own ideal dimension (1992, 11). That is to say, it presents itself on the one hand subjectively in the process of momentary interpretation, and on the other hand objectively in the form of a historical structure which can be anticipated in every phenomenon of the interliterary process (24).

Out of the four authors, the least internationally known is the Slovak Ivan Horvách (1904–1960), whose works can be classified as avant-garde modernism emulating European, in particular French, influences (Habaj 2005; Kuzmíková 2006). In the 1920s, Horvách ranked among the most cosmopolitan and linguistically skilled Slovak authors drawn to the West; he was intimately familiar with Germany, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and especially Paris, the interwar cradle of the “world republic of letters” (Casanova 2004, 10), which in his own words was “for every foreigner his second home [...] the essence of the world” (Rosenbaum 1967, 33). Yet it is impossible to unequivocally determine the ratio of foreign influences in the intricate structure of Horvách's prose because the author's expressionistic themes bear a strong Slovak accent (Tomčík 1979, 33). According to Ján Števček, the simplicity of linguistic and stylistic devices reflects a specific poetization of reality which is deromanticized and civilized (1981, 190), but principally based on expressing “the internal content of the atmosphere created by the setting and characters” (Rosenbaum 1967, 105). Horvách's personal destiny was typical of Central European leftist intellectuals engaged in politics: his diplomatic career was interrupted by arrest in 1950 and the accusation of “bourgeois” nationalism, followed by his premature death and incomplete rehabilitation.

Horvách's most successful texts include five autobiographical novellas inspired by his travels in Europe (mainly Germany and France) published under the umbrella title *Vízum do Európy* (Visa for Europe, 1930) and the essay *Návrat do Paríža* (Return to Paris, completed in 1938 but published in 1947). The focus of his attention is travelling and gaining knowledge through individual “human stories” that are determined by the urban environment and by evoking the unique atmosphere located outside the native Slovak background (Rosenbaum 1987, 10). His “mature view of the world” (Števček 1981, 191) is outlined against the background of expressionist poetics and surrealist techniques (Kuzmíková 2010, 583–584), combining sensuality and emotionality with a sense of social criticism, typical of the early-20th-century Slovak realistic tradition. Suppressing the narrator's function leads to the enhancement of philosophical relativism in the structure of characters who are witnesses rather than agents in an event they find difficult to understand. His strong inclination towards humanism consists in the aptitude to contemplate particular human situations

and reveal the internal moments determining human behavior (Rosenbaum 1967, 170). *Návrat do Paríže* is an emotional declaration of Horváth's love of Paris, which he visited in 1937, and provides an example of the influence of French culture on Slovak prose in the interwar period. It is not a random occurrence that Jana Kuzmíková sees the greatness of Horváth's style in a peculiar discursive style of writing (2010, 583), where a literary work fails to be linked with a portrayal of subjective reality as a result of the poetistic-surrealistic accentuation of the acoustic and formal qualities. At the same time, it has been noted that Horváth formulated his own concept of Central Europeanism, which consisted of admiration for French culture emphasizing not the ethnic basis, but the spiritual cooperation of different nationalities united by a common place of residence and the civil democratic principle. In this idea of a transnational "cultural community" he saw a model example for the emerging coexistence of Czechs and Slovaks after 1918 (Bojničanová 2015, 317).

Slovak literary historiography acknowledges Horváth's "bringing to Slovak culture a modern European atmosphere and the latest artistic streams" (Kuzmíková 2010, 586) based on discursiveness and a psycholinguistic approach. This is what makes him an ideal candidate for "worlding", i.e. a "world affected" author in interwar Slovak literature. Such aspirations, however, are limited by the unfavorable factors resulting from the overall social and literary situation and his lack of translations in world languages. The author's "worldliness" thus remains only in a potential position. Admittedly, the European-oriented Horváth implemented his own original poetics, idiosyncratic concept, and style of writing that aesthetically oscillated between traditional and avant-garde poles, ancient influences, Bergsonism, and Nietzscheanism. Horváth's importance goes beyond the scope of national literature, thanks to his knowledge of modern Western impulses unequivocally supporting the trends that brought Slovak literature to the genesis of lyricized prose, which could be considered one of the artistic climaxes in the interwar period, comparable with European development. His relative lack of readership and the receptional vacuum of his works was not filled by numerous editions after 1989, and his texts did not go through the process of post-textual adaptational establishment, as in the case of Čapek or Gombrowicz. It needs to be emphasized that on the scale from global to specifically national, Horváth distinctly sides with extra-Slovak literary aspirations, his attitude to France being motivated more strongly by the endeavor to "catch up with the French", and to transfer French cultural patterns into the Slovak literary context, without due respect to domestic conditions. Therefore, in the case of this author, the category of "additional integration" (Ďurišin 1995, 44–45) into the world literary space will hardly materialize, unless a more potent globalizing impulse comes in the form of translations or media presentations based on the original interpretation of his works against the background of European development. As we can see, even his efforts to distinguish himself with his democratism, to choose transnational topics and thereby break out of a narrow national framework, are not enough for Horváth to be considered a truly global writer.

The attribute of "worldliness" can be better ascribed to Karel Čapek (1890–1938), whose works entered the world literary process through translation. In the contem-

porary domestic context, his success was frequently identified with thematic “vagueness”, with a comprehensible style and easy reception, and especially with “cosmopolitan nationlessness” (Buriánek 1988, 9). Even from the perspective of a “small” Central European literature, Čapek’s life and works fully fit in the category of a “world author” capable of diminishing the notional distance between the dominant center and the dependent “peripheries”. From the early beginnings of his literary career, he was connected with world culture – chiefly French (which after 1918 was considered the leading exponent of art and literature) and also English. He manifested his appreciation for French culture by a masterly translation of Apollinaire’s *Alcools* (1919) and other poetic texts published in the anthology *Francouzská poesie nové doby* (Contemporary French poetry, 1920). The author’s skill in capturing the “spirit” of the original through the means of expression used by French Symbolists, Futurists, Unanimists, and avant-garde Spiritualists paved the way to the poetic sensibility of modern Czech poetry, led by Vítězslav Nezval and Jaroslav Seifert. In the inter-war period, he became the official representative and cultural ambassador of the first Czechoslovak republic and its humanistic politics personified by the moral prestige of its president Tomáš G. Masaryk. After 1918, within the context of Central European nationalistic or right-wing regimes, the newly-established state of Czechoslovakia represented an oasis of political democracy and civil rights recognized in the Western world. Čapek’s close relationship with Masaryk permeated the atmosphere of the “Pátečníci” (Friday men), weekly gatherings established by Čapek that brought together Masaryk and a group of democratically-oriented Czech writers; these sessions were incorporated into his three-volume *Hovory s T. G. Masarykem* (*Talks with T. G. Masaryk*, 1928–1935). Čapek befriended Western writers like George Bernard Shaw, G. K. Chesterton, H. G. Wells, Jules Romains, and Romain Rolland, and in 1925, he was unanimously elected the Chair of the Czech section of the International PEN club, which in the mid-1920s was regarded as an institutionalized pantheon of respected authors awarded the honor of “worldliness”.

Čapek’s “worldliness” was most obviously supported by his global themes, which in his plays and prose were always based upon a Czech background. The “realistic” implications of his themes stand in relation to the problems of modern civilization, raising philosophical questions of the “practical life” of an individual in reference to the social or national community. Čapek’s opinion that genuinely “great literature” should not be “totally timeless, undetermined by time, place and culture” (1912, 104) was consolidated by his skepticism toward the possibility of recognizing the absolute truth, his conviction about its equivocality, the contention of mystery, faith and reason, the confrontation of morals, and the danger of scientific progress. His themes are generally topical and also anchored in contemporary life, which Čapek presented through polydiscursive texts based on updated traditional forms, such as the novel, short story, and other short forms enlivened by his lifelong experience as a journalist. For example, in the foreground of his drama *R. U. R.* (1920) he presents a “real” utopia about the creation of an artificial man-robot misused by mankind for war and slavery. His satirical-humorist novel *Továrna na Absolutno* (*The Absolute at Large*, 1922) is a parable of the potential destruction of human civilization following

the invention of a special drive (carburetor) which breaks coal atoms while liberating “the absolute”, i.e. God. Similarly, *Krakatit* (1924) describes the invention of an explosive capable of destroying the world. Its inventor Prokop, getting over a shock, realizes that “doing small things” (Čapek 1958, 290) means fulfilling the original purpose of unselfishly helping mankind (Mukařovský 1958, 324–325). In the drama *Věc Makropulos* (*The Makropulos Affair*, 1922) the author draws on the age-old human desire to defeat death – although the famous opera singer Emilia Marty can apply an elixir of life, she refuses to use it after three hundred years because she understands the wisdom that there is “an end to immortality” (Čapek 1992, 259).

In the 1930s, becoming aware of the imminent political threat of Nazi regime, Čapek’s work (both literary and journalistic) took on a pronounced anti-fascist tone. This likely prevented him from being awarded the Nobel Prize, given the Nobel Committee’s unwillingness to offend Hitler’s Germany. In his allegorical novel *Válka s mloky* (*War with the Newts*, 1936) he uses the seemingly harmless newts, whose unexpected proliferation leads to the extermination of mankind, as a satire of fascist aspirations for global supremacy. Similarly, in the drama *Bílá nemoc* (*The White Disease*, 1937) the author highlights nationalistic hysteria and mass emotions, together with manipulative dictators’ control of the masses, while in *Matka* (*The Mother*, 1938) his humanistic conviction is supported through the symbolic portrayal of the mother summoning up her strength to resist evil even at the cost of losing her last son.

Čapek’s resistance to fascism anticipated his tragic death of pneumonia at Christmas 1938, only three months after Czechoslovakia was betrayed by its allies in the Munich agreement, followed by the attacks of the right-wing press in the period of the “second republic”. His problematic life, characterized by rises and falls, calculated misunderstanding, and world popularity came to premature end before the age of fifty – his “worldliness” being enhanced by another relevant factor, the post-textual life after the author’s physical death in the form of affirmative adaptational sequences (Dović 2017, 98; Helgason 2011, 166–167). The narrative structure of Čapek’s texts featuring dialogizing and alterations of the authorial perspective typically required a film version or a television adaptation. The novel *Krakatit* was actually adapted to film twice: once under the same title by the Czech director Otakar Vávra in 1947, and in 1980, under the title *Temné slunce* (Dark Sun). During the author’s lifetime, *Věc Makropulos* was set to music by the celebrated composer Leoš Janáček. With the author’s approval the libretto was adapted by the composer himself in anticipation of its sensational international success. It premiered in December 1926 on the stage of the National Theatre of Brno and like *Liška Bystrouška* (*The Cunning Little Vixen*, 1924), Janáček’s earlier operatic work, was staged in other European theatres. These productions helped Janáček to become the most successful international representative of modern Czech music, just as Čapek was recognized as the most significant interwar Czech (or Czechoslovak) man of letters, whose texts gained a solid footing in the world literary process. With the passing of time and the fading of memory, his external pressures have lost their “dramatic contours” and the “worldliness” of his texts depends on the reader’s receptive horizon, particularly on the timeless social commitment of Čapek’s humanistic ideas. We can only partly approve

of František Buriánek's thesis that Čapek's "worldliness" rests in his civil commitment, in his protest as an artist against fascism and all forms of colonial oppression (1985, 140). Buriánek points out the interpretational polysemy of Čapek's works, which in our view signals a balance of the "global" and "local" aspects: "The potentiality of double interpretation of a work – in an utterly topical, i.e. specifically political sense on the one hand, and in the timeless, generally human sense – is typical of almost all of Čapek's works" (141).

Another writer whose works synthesize the national and the worldly is Sándor Márai (1900–1989), who was born in a Hungarian bourgeois family with Saxon roots in the heterogeneous city of Košice, which assimilated Hungarian, Slovak, German, and Jewish elements. His earliest publications appeared in Germany, where he completed his studies in journalism, but later, he wrote and published in Hungarian. His fluency in both languages qualified him to produce the first Hungarian translation of Franz Kafka (Pató 2012, 695–699). In the interwar period, Márai shuttled between cultural hubs: Venice, Paris, Prague, Leipzig, Berlin, Vienna, Florence, and Frankfurt. As a contributor to a number of prestigious German journals and dailies, he could monitor cultural and political events in Central and Western Europe alike. Having left Hungary in 1919 as a young and inexperienced man, he returned after nine years as a mature intellectual, shaped by West European streams of thought, mainly by West European modernism. In the two subsequent decades he lived and worked in Hungary, which he left forever in 1948, first for Italy, then for the United States, where he stayed from 1952 until his death in 1989. Márai can be labelled as a cosmopolitan uninhibited by any complex who mingled with the foremost intellectuals of his time and was appreciated for his exceptional brilliance, but thanks to material difficulties he could never feel at home with them.

Konrad Ludwicki is right about Márai connecting what is universal in him and what is intimate, interior, and original: "he assimilates the heritage of literature, modifying it; creating his own form and his own world" (2008, 131), which Ludwicki regards as a quality of prominent, truly "world" authors. It was during his first intense contact with the West that Márai experienced an intensive "worlding", a very fruitful contact with the Western culture, which however did not prevent him from being critical. He did not "melt" his artistic vision in strong artistic currents and dominant fashions, but embraced specificity. His exclusivity among his Central European contemporaries, who were often only imitators of world authors, consists in his ability to absorb the supranational and creatively modify these elements through his perceptivity, sensuality, and unique talent. Márai's *magnum opus* is his *Diaries*, completed over more than half of his long life, between 1943 and his suicide in 1989. These elaborate and carefully edited texts reveal the universal struggle of an individual standing on the edge of society, lonely and misunderstood. They witness a European fighting for his cultural and literary heritage, whose spiritual homeland – not just Hungary, or even Central Europe itself, but the whole of the Western world – was exposed to destructive contact with the predatory pressure from the East. Márai refers to the European memoir tradition, mentioning diaries such as those kept by André Gide or Jules Renard. It was especially Gide to whose ideas and art he felt very close

(Varga 2012, 26–27). This makes Márai not only an admirer but also a successor to the best traditions of memoir literature. The feeling of estrangement passed through all of his works and constitutes the pillar of his artistic orientation. It can be found in his autobiographical prose *Idegen emberek* (Strangers, 1931), part of the three-volume cycle known as *A Garrenék műve* (The Garrens' work), which is a testimony to Márai's personal development as an author. From the classical Bildungsroman Márai proceeded to experimental prose featuring elements like reportage, inner monologue, and essayistic passages. The latter are a multi-level literary recording of the fall of the Habsburg Empire as the end of an epoch. These motives also appear in his travelogues and reportages written from Paris (Zwolińska 2014, 67–68), later exemplified in the abovementioned *Diaries* and the autobiographical prose *Föld, föld!...* (Land, land!..., 1972; Eng. trans. *Memoir of Hungary, 1944–1948*, 1996).

In his works Márai captured the world on the edge of chaos, the imperceptible bond between the Central European area and the West; he rendered the Central European inclinations for German culture as a permanent link with the Western, not only German but also Italian, French, and English cultures. The protagonist of his works is a Central European intellectual exposed to the incessant pressure of politics and literary fashions, who is not willing to accept any compromise, loyal to the path of his own choice, to his inner voice and his values, although it means living on the social periphery and causing perpetual misunderstanding. There are striking differences between the critical appraisal of Márai's works "in the world" and in his home country. International readers and critics recognize Márai as the author of elegant, sophisticated prose describing the decline of an epoch, whereas Hungarian ones appreciate him as a master of autobiographical prose (Varga 2012, 24). This double vision also reflects the remarkable tension between "worldliness" and belonging to a "small" literature, lending space for new approaches to the analysis of Márai's creations (Sabatos 2013, 35–36). It is Márai's works that perform the synthesis of what is personal and what is universal; what is national and what is worldly. "The author concurrently examines the cultural heritage of prevalingly European values. He attempts to lend them a personal characteristic through existential verification" (Ludwicki 2008, 137). The perspicacity of his creations, his gift of prescience, as well as the knowledge of Western structures, enabled him to remain a detached and trenchant observer. In his works, Márai synthesizes what is peculiar, original, and uniquely his own with the added value of his contact with world literature. Márai's "worldliness" is mainly apparent in his incessantly returning reflections on the developmental orientation of European culture as well as in his in-depth understanding of its structures, together with his premonition as early as the 1940s of the dire threat to Central Europe and the whole West posed by the Soviet Union. His emblematic motifs are the global crisis, a fear of the departure from basic values, and disappointment with contemporary developments.

The Polish prose writer and dramatist Witold Gombrowicz (1904–1969) belongs to the same generation, born in the same year as Ivan Horváth and four years later than Márai. Like his Hungarian counterpart, he wrote diaries of life in exile, first in Argentina after 1939 and in France after 1964. Unlike Márai, he gained world re-

nown a few years before his death, including several nominations for the Nobel Prize in Literature between 1966 and 1969. Gombrowicz's literary production shows distinctive features of "worldliness" because he was a successful precursor of certain streams of thought, like the postmodern grotesque. His most popular novel in this genre was *Ferdydurke* (1937) featuring original puns, plays on artistic forms, and linguistic experiments. It contains an expressive reference to mystification and demystification, the entropy of man into face and mask, the issues of human identity facing continuous pressure from the society, culture, and other people (the problem of form), and last but not least, purely philosophical issues surpassing the existential wave of French prose, such as the thematization of futility, the absurdity of human fate and freedom, and the possibility to determine one's fate (Czakoń 2015, 134).

Like Márai, Gombrowicz drew on his personal experience as a European and succeeded in elevating the form and content of his works to a universal level. They feature the issues of the Polish inferiority complex toward the West, yet at the same time, what promoted the author to the world rank is his success in portraying characters tangled in a complicated network of social and cultural expectations, enhanced by foreshadowing the orientation of later postmodern discourse. In his *Diaries*, perhaps his greatest literary work (Czakoń 2015, 137–138), he thematizes, under the influence of postmodernism, the role of the writer and analyses the literary process evaluating his own works through the use of metaliterary digressions. Another postmodern feature of Gombrowicz's creations is his conviction about the impossibility of comprehensively grasping the world, humankind, or life in its entirety (Fiała 2015). Gombrowicz's writings are a direct reflection of his endeavor to diminish the aesthetic and value differences between what is deemed dominant, central, and what is peripheral, as mentioned above. In contrast to Márai's works, Gombrowicz's can be labelled as "worldly" since they are exceptionally inspirational for other renowned authors. This can be exemplified by Milan Kundera, one of the eminent personalities in world literature, who belongs among the promoters and admirers of Gombrowicz's thought, as is evident from his essays on literature (Soliński 2010). Jakub Češka has emphasized that Gombrowicz, Barthes, and Kundera "share the same thematic orientation (the sign impenetrability; its interpellation; and the thematics of seeming unaffectedness)" (2010, 63). Gombrowicz's texts addressed not only emigrants from Central Europe or Western intellectuals, but were also highly inspirational for Scandinavian authors (Królczyk-Bremer 2012).

Regardless of his status in France as a celebrity whose works were translated and accepted, Gombrowicz did not escape the problems encountered by writers in "small" literatures and exemplifies the failure of one level described above by Przemysław Czapliński. For a representative of "small" literature to join the circle of world authors, his works must have the benefit of illustrious translators. This is where Gombrowicz's attempt partly failed, since inaccurate and ambiguous translations obviously spoiled the further stages of his world reception. A detailed analysis of errors and inaccuracies in French translations of Gombrowicz's dramas is offered by Milena Kusztelska (2007). In extreme cases, translation may result in removing entire passages or even chapters, as was the case of Milan Kundera's novel *Žert* (1967; *The Joke*, 1969).

No wonder his traumatic experience with flawed translations inspired Kundera's obsession with preserving the accuracy of his essays and novels in other languages. The translational context introduces other substantial findings in regard to worldliness. According to one study dealing with the Arabic translations of Gombrowicz's works, the translator primarily perceives the Polish author as a European and an author representing universal values common to all mankind:

In the introduction to the Arabic version, the translator qualified the author as a representative of contemporary European drama. Gombrowicz is mentioned alongside Ionesco and Beckett, occupying the pantheon of contemporary theatre avant-garde. Thus the Polish author seeks a way to European culture through Europe, as a European. Though his literary creations display conspicuous marks of Polish culture and mentality, they are perceived, this context notwithstanding, as European, i.e. universal in their own right. (Sławkowa 2010, 232)

The translation issues are among the most intrinsic questions of research on his literary works, as confirmed by an international congress of translators specializing in Gombrowicz (Kongres tłumaczy Gombrowicza) held jointly in France and Poland in 2019, which was evidence not only of the abiding interest of translators but also of the Polish author's increasing acceptance as a world author.

The abovementioned writers penetrating the global literary circulation (including the analysis of the "fruitfulness" of particular criteria), exemplified by four Central European authors, do not contradict the general postulate regarding the importance of a work's language and country. At the same time, they point to the imperative of "added" value with individual texts in "small" literatures. It seems necessary to specify our condition positively against the hegemony of Western political centers and, above all, to reduce the difference between "center" and "periphery", to legitimize national "otherness" through their texts and their "life stories" as a universally recognized value. Individual texts more or less successfully withstand a sophisticated network of "pitfalls" such as the level of translation, media presentation, reception horizon, reading tradition, or subjective interest in the authorial personality and his works. Yet prior to this phase, these texts (within the local context at least) have to canonize their potential to constitute a specific original world and, to a certain extent, even the thematical novelty through the aestheticization of national images. Moreover, in the Central European area, the authors draw on the tradition of metonymic cultural communication based on the respect for cultural variety and diversity (Zelenka 2012, 124). It is exactly this aspect of "Central Europeanism" that suggests semantic and terminological complications in defining the concept of world literature, since it is not possible to precisely specify the mutual ratio of non-literary and literary factors. It emerged from our considerations that the "worldliness" of these Central European writers cannot be measured by external factors such as the size of the country and the importance of the language. On the other hand, even aesthetic criteria such as genre-thematic originality and "progressiveness" of the represented ideas may not indicate "worldliness" if it is not supported by quality translations. The four authors perceive their Central Europeanness with varying intensity as a cultural and mental phenomenon typified by skepticism, a sense of irony, disillusion-

ment, a mistrust of political ideologies, and the interconnection of tragic and comic genre features. Indisputably, this is the “added” value of these texts on their way to literature not only “affected by the world” but to authentic world literature perceived as an ideal symbol of humanity and cultural memory.

Translated from Czech by Jiřina Johanišová

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The Central European path to worldliness from the point of view of so-called small literatures

Central European literature. World literature. Global literature. Karel Čapek. Witold Gombrowicz. Ivan Horváth. Sándor Márai.

Although the acceptance of a text into world literature is directly related to the importance of its country and language of origin, works from so-called small literatures can also become part of the global canon. They establish their “worldliness” not on the power of extraliterary moments, but on the ability to constitute the world using the aestheticization of national images. This article analyzes four literary-historical examples of authors (Ivan Horváth, Karel Čapek, Sandor Márai, and Witold Gombrowicz) attempting to become world authors through their “Central Europeanism”. Horváth seeks artistic inspiration for his dreamlike visions in French culture, Čapek attracts readers with the universality of his humanistic ideas, Márai embodies intellectual the nostalgia for the vanished Habsburg Empire, and Gombrowicz intuitively anticipates the postmodern grotesque. Despite their differences in genre and theme, these authors are connected by their inclination towards the West. At the same time, they all demonstrate that in this distinctive and indigenous (in terms of values) “interspace” between the West and the East, there is no “pure” national literature that does not synthesize a diverse foreign element. It is obvious that the way of this aestheticization of local “peripherality” implies their possible paths to “worldliness”.

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