



Piret Peiker

Post-communist literatures: A postcolonial perspective

The traditional schema of the western European *Bildungsroman* is subverted in postcolonial novels, where the protagonist, instead of becoming reconciled to the adult world, is caught in a state of adolescent uncertainty. Estonian literary critic Piret Peiker sees this pattern repeated in post-Soviet narratives; reading works by Witold Gombrowicz, Czeslaw Milosz, Milan Kundera, and Estonian author Emil Tode, she demonstrates how the Romantic ideal of "wholeness", located in the western European metropolis, is undermined.

In what follows, I will suggest that it would be both possible and fruitful to extend the boundaries of the postcolonial studies paradigm to cover the literatures of post-communist countries. To do so would help elaborate a general comparative framework for post-communist literary studies, as well as provide new theoretical insights into the methodological and ideological underpinnings of postcolonial studies itself. A legitimate counter-argument in this context (often rehearsed in postcolonial studies) is that such an endeavour would lead to excessive abstraction and generalization. Would it not be a kind of cultural imperialism to collapse into one category literatures whose histories and traditions are as different as those of India and Nigeria, let alone Poland or Estonia? This is a valid question and I do not imply that the authors or traditions of the aforementioned literatures do not deserve in-depth studies with a narrower focus. However, the problem in current eastern European literary scholarship is not slapdash theoretical generalization, but habitual national reclusion, which renders invisible both the significant structural similarities and the notable differences of the literatures of the post-communist space.

In order to explain how postcolonial studies can contribute to the interpretation of post-communist literatures and cultures, I will first give a brief account of the history and the theoretical premises of the postcolonial field, applying its insights into the poetics of postcolonial cultures' literatures to the characteristic features of post-communist literatures. Finally, as an illustration of what the postcolonial perspective might contribute, I will point out some recurring patterns in the eastern European *Bildungsroman* (the coming-of-age novel), viewing it against the background of the western European and postcolonial one.

Postcolonialism defines itself as a field that deals with the "effects of colonization on cultures and societies", reciprocally affecting both the colonizer and the colonized.¹ It is not a unified field, but a set of varied and often contradictory discourses that do not agree on a single thesis or method. Nevertheless, these discourses remain interrelated and are mostly in dialogue with each other. The term "postcolonialism" first arose in the 1960s to

designate the period of extensive decolonization after WWII. As one can see from the aforementioned definition, since that time it has become substantially broader in meaning, now incorporating a multiple range of associations, from "anti-colonialism" to "understanding colonialism and anti-colonialism".² The "post" in postcolonialism is now used with two parallel meanings, which are often confused: first, the direct historical-chronological meaning — "after colonialism" (as in "post-war"); second, the more philosophical meaning, denoting a space or position beyond colonialism, yet inextricably linked to it (as in "postmodernism", "post-feminism").

The postcolonial project has been described as "a reckoning with the colonial past".³ This "reckoning" would certainly involve reconsideration of the knowledge and discourses of the colonial mindset, including the axioms they rely on and the categories and language these are cast in. That kind of radical revisioning is a way to think through the identity problems faced by post-colonial societies, where people, caught between their colonized pasts and an international postmodern present, struggle to establish new self-narratives. These narratives, both individual and collective, allow them to re-imagine themselves as communities on a new basis and in a manner that is both satisfactory and usable.

This broad sketch of post-colonial thought presents the field as a general framework for studying colonial-type relationships of power and their aftermath — everywhere and anywhere.⁴ However, the actual paradigm that has emerged is far more particularistic, limiting research to European colonialism outside Europe, with the bulk of it dealing with former British colonies. That is so not only in the choice of case studies, but also in the general shape of the field's world outlook. Contemporary postcolonial studies inherits its sphere of interest from earlier intellectual currents: Commonwealth Studies and its derivatives, the Negritude movement, Edward Said's *Orientalism*. These have, of course, extremely different focuses; all, however, treat "Europe" as their opposite pole, and as a result conflate and homogenize their concept of "Europe" to fit the European/postcolonial binary opposition. This conflation is one factor in making eastern Europe invisible as a separate category. The conflation has important consequences. It screens out non-European colonization and ignores colonial-type regimes within Europe, both of which have features analogous to those that came into being as a result of European colonization overseas.⁵

These issues must be faced by anyone who wants to negotiate between postcolonial and post-communist studies. In dealing with the experience of western European colonization, postcolonial writing tackles something very relevant for post-communism. In some way or another, all the different strands of postcolonial studies confront the Western Enlightenment project of modernity and the professed supreme rationality and universality of its grand narratives. They must do so in order to think their way through the superimposition of this project on their particular colonized spaces and its consequences — psychological and cultural as well as political or economic. Accounts and diagnoses of this kind are varied, yet all allow a relativized view of Western grand narratives.

The difference, then, between western Europe and the rest of the world, where modernity was imported or imposed by various degrees of force, is that in western Europe Enlightenment metaphysics became *the* metaphysics, the "normal and natural" way to interpret the world and human history. It created a stable cosmos out of chaos, providing a predictable world where one could

have a firm sense of self and belief in rational agency. In places where it has been imposed from outside, by military force or otherwise, it is the paramount discourse but not overwhelmingly so, since it is constantly being challenged and destabilized by other competing forms of knowledge and rationality. It is hybridized by these, yet not fully synthesized into them. Therefore there is no sense of security, no sense of personal empowerment and of being in control of one's destiny. Rather, there is a perception of fragmentation, of being "constantly liminal" and forever incomplete; also, there are feelings of self-estrangement as one follows (or pretends to follow) imposed norms that one has not fully naturalized.

This mindset is often described by postcolonial studies as the "postcolonial condition". The structural affinities with post-communist cultures are obvious. Historically speaking, eastern European relations with Western modernity have been far from easy. First, Soviet Marxist-Leninism is itself a teleology derived from Western modernity narratives, although, importantly, a specifically Russian version of these. Additionally, it is not Soviet colonization alone that gives today's post-communist countries numerous similar features. The previous history of eastern Europe is also important in this respect: before the Soviet Russian occupation, all countries in eastern Europe had already undergone colonization in some form in their recent history; often, this was extremely lengthy or repeated. None managed to establish a sufficiently "naturalized" domestic modernity before the communist takeover.⁶ The superimposed Russian communist model remained an alien one, failing to succeed even by its own criteria.⁷ Thus, the thought-worlds of the post-communist cultures have significant parallels with those traditionally referred to as "postcolonial".

Although there are huge differences between postcolonial national literatures and between individual postcolonial authors, the broad generalization underlying the concept of "postcolonial literature" rests on the presumption that there are certain characteristics, both structural and thematic, shared by literatures formed in cultures with colonial experience. A good deal of those features are also significant features of post-communist literatures. There are parallel developments in content: many postcolonial texts deal directly with issues concerning decolonization, nation-state construction, and metropolis-periphery relations. Furthermore, there are similarities on the figurative level: postcolonial literature in general tends to use "doubling" tropes, such as irony, allegory, and parody, often rewriting a colonizing culture's central texts or genres from a changed perspective.⁸ The postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha has also pointed out the Gothic or uncanny motifs in postcolonial literature, especially its unhomey and haunted houses, which more generally foreground a sense of dislocation, characters' and narrators' perception of the space of one's immediate environment as threatening and alienating. Bhabha also discusses the specificity of postcolonial narrators, the basic difficulty they have in creating seamless "logical" yarns amidst fluidity of values and cultural disorientation.⁹

These features of postcolonial literature may seem to be related to the postmodern worldview, and indeed, many early postcolonial ideas first become thinkable within Western literary theory or philosophy. Yet, the correspondences between postcolonialism and postmodernism are not clear-cut. Though postcolonials may often envisage the world as accident-prone and lacking teleology, and human selves as fragmented and hybrid, they do not necessarily celebrate this state of affairs as postmodernism tends to do. Indeed, a repeated motif in postcolonial literature is just the

opposite: the longing for a *topos* of maturity and order, for a mythical realm of centeredness, that exists or existed somewhere, maybe in some ideal past, some Golden Age, maybe also in a contemporary metropolitan centre stylized as a capital of the world. However, it is significant that the metropolises do not match the ideals entertained: not only do the narrators in the postcolonial texts such as V.S. Naipaul's *The Mimic Men* or Derek Walcott's *Omeros* give up their hopes for London or for Paris, but the whole idea of the world having a centre, even in the sense of a cultural and philosophical Universal, becomes suspect. As for eastern European literature of the Soviet period, Moscow is not frequent as the embodiment of centeredness, probably because it was perceived more as a centre of power than of prestige, and thus did not quite qualify as the place of "cultural universality". Yet, in *The Seventh Spring of Peace* (1985) by Estonian author Viivi Luik, the child-narrator growing up in a post-war Estonian village does have a longing for Russia, its cities with their palaces and kindergartens, of which she knows from radio and books. She imagines this to be the proper world, not like her poverty-struck village, where everything is all wrong, and which, because it is not at all like the world in songs and books, she perceives as unreal. In Luik's novel, like in the aforementioned works by Naipaul and Walcott, the adult narrator-voice frames and problematizes this vision of her younger self.

The genre of *Bildungsroman* intertwines the topic of metropolis-periphery relationship with that of personal formation and acceptance into adult society. As such, it serves well as a point of comparison between eastern European works and western European and postcolonial ones. Theorists of the English and German *Bildungsroman* associate the genre with initiation into adulthood that exists in some form in all cultures, and specifically with western European modernity and the changed approach to and demands for coming of age in the eighteenth century, namely the construction of the concept of youth as apprenticeship. In a *Bildungsroman*, the protagonist negotiates his (and less often her) way through modern society, resolving in some form the basic oppositions between change and tradition, and between individual and collective. Typically, a young individual leaves home, frequently after a conflict between generations; he goes into the wide world, often travelling from province to metropolis, where he experiences and learns, develops and matures as an individual. Having become reconciled with society, or at least having consolidated his attitude towards it, he returns home, where he is recognized as an adult member of society with legitimate agency. The poetics of the traditional *Bildungsroman* is teleological and historicist in the sense that whatever happens serves the ultimate good and self-fulfilment of the protagonist — his or her rational progress in the world.¹⁰ Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, and Bronte's *Jane Eyre* are classic examples of the genre, while later developments include the definitive Soviet *Bildungsroman*, Ostrovsky's *How the Steel Was Tempered* (1932–1934), Böll's *The Bread of Those Early Years* (1955), and David Lodge's *Paradise News* (1991). The negative variations of this Grand Narrative of Enlightenment and Romanticism, for example a social mobility novel where the protagonist develops a critical attitude towards the social ladder he has climbed, follow the same structure of progressive development and maturation.

In the postcolonial world, such a completed *Bildung* is almost impossible, since the heroes must seek their identities in *milieus* that have no stability and consistency, but are split between different sets of values, or in constant flux. The permutations taken by the *Bildungsroman* in postcolonial societies outside Europe have to a some degree been studied by postcolonial critics. Alfred J. Lopez gives a thoughtful reading of Jamaican and South African novels, in

which the racially split worlds are mirrored in the split minds of the protagonists who often protest through erotic freethinking and "deviancy" (in a parallel with post-communist literature).¹¹ In a ground-breaking study, Wangari wa Nyatetu-Waigwa draws on anthropological theories to read three French-language African novels featuring protagonists who enter initiation, but get stuck there never to emerge as adults; she calls these "novels of liminality".¹² I suggest that there are a number of post-communist texts that could be usefully read using this paradigm.

"*Bypassing Rue Descartes*" by Czeslaw Milosz could be called a "*Bildungspoem*", since it introduces in a condensed form several of the key motifs that the novels deal with in a ramified manner and bring to various different kinds of resolutions. It is the quintessential *Bildungsroman* story of a young man who leaves the periphery and goes to the metropolis, the ideal of universal modernity. In this case, however, it is not just a journey to metropolis, but a journey to a foreign metropolis. The foreignness of the universality is not easy to ignore, the empowering "necessary illusion" — that becoming an adult in modern society is in some sense a coherent journey — is lacking. Adapting to the alien world is not projected as growth in terms of one's previously adopted values ("self-betterment"); it is not an evolution but a total caesura, or a revolution. At that point, one cannot possibly return to one's home and one's father as a legitimate reformer. If one is to return as an agent of change, one must come back as a revolutionary (note the metonymic symbolism of the geographical names in the poem).

As it is, the final part of the poem proclaims disillusionment with the universalist project — with the idea that there is "a capital of the world", a single place where modernity, maturity, and full personhood can be reached. It counterposes a different worldview — understanding the world as having multiple centres of moral worth. Yet the recovery of the "natural world-order" is thoroughly tainted by the sense of guilt and loss condensed in the motif of the killed water-snake. The bitterness of the poem goes far beyond disappointment in French ideas. The sacralized axiology of the protagonist's home culture has been violated and he finds himself in a broken world.

If the western European *Bildungsroman* "uncovers" or constructs the concealed order or wholeness of life, the eastern European one registers a journey towards such an order, which often is perceived as existing "elsewhere", but then with a second move restates scepticism about the existence of such an order, or at least a scepticism about the possibility of achieving it. The central European *Bildung* narratives share this trajectory with non-European post-colonial narratives. In mentioning Saigon and Marrakesh in the same breath as Vilnius and Bucharest, "Bypassing Rue Descartes" is saying exactly this; the similarity of its journey with postcolonial works such as *The Mimic Men* or *Omeros* is obvious, though in the latter cases the metropolis is London, not Paris.

It has to be stressed that the ideals and the disappointments do not merge into a synthesis: there is no "the hero returns sadder but wiser" conclusion, and the narrative remains haunted by figures conveying a sense of fragmentation, guilt, loss, and possibly anger. Hence, central European narratives of personhood generally convey the psychological stress of living without the ability to construct a coherent self. They associate self with feelings of immaturity, incompleteness, and impotence in dealing with what appears to be an equally fluid world. Their counterstrategies employ either irony or self-pity, or most commonly a combination of both.

Witold Gombrowicz's novel *Ferdydurke*, a magnificent anti-*Bildungsroman* written in 1937, treats all these motifs head on.¹³ While, to my mind, it is wholly free of self-pity, its delight in irony and paradoxes, the contradictions and gaps it uses, make it very much a part of the tradition. The first-person narrator is an adult writer who is turned into a schoolboy by a patronizing professor and who gradually comes to accept the role. The novel has been read as being about degeneration under alien powers; to my mind, however, it is far more ambiguous and complex than that. As the narrator conveys it, the people considered to be mature adults are not very different from himself: they all participate in various strange and intricate rituals in order to construct or consolidate identities in the fluid world, however, do not seem to analyze their behaviour as the narrator does, nor even be aware of it.

Ferdydurke thinks its way through the familiar modern oppositions of authenticity-inauthenticity, tradition-change, adulthood-adolescence, and does so entirely on its own terms: by dramatizing ritualized interplay. The novel has been called postmodern, but its postmodern features can be interpreted as a relaxed but profound description of the non-western European experience, as a description of life without a belief in grand narratives — and in this case also without regretting their absence.

Milan Kundera's *Life is Elsewhere*, a *Künstlerroman* from the Soviet period in central Europe, is a parody of the traditional "artist biography" and an angrily sarcastic account of the Romantic world-picture.¹⁴ The artist figure, Jaromil, is unable to mature and pull loose from his domineering mother, who has decided almost before he is born that he is to be a great poet. He is constantly nagged by a sense of dissatisfaction and fear that real, authentic life is elsewhere. Looking for heroic purpose in the dizzying fluidity of his society, he throws himself into the adventure of communist revolution and subsequently becomes a collaborator of the secret police. Finally, in a parodic refiguration of a mature hero's return home, he dies from a trivial cold in his mother's arms. For Kundera, the narcissistic unifying worldview of Romanticism is the ultimate immaturity, equivalent to the desire to return to the mother's womb.

Having discussed narratives in Soviet and pre-Soviet eras, I will now consider, what, if anything, has changed in the narratives of post-Soviet era. The protagonist and narrator of Estonian author Emil Tode's novel *Border State* (1993) is a translator of French poetry, and becomes yet another young eastern European visitor to Paris, Milosz's "capital of the world", to see "how the humans live" (131).¹⁵ This time it is the Paris of the early 1990s, a postmodern place where the Universal Pinnacle of Civilization is embodied in the welfare state. Other universal belief systems seem to have faded: whereas a Western character half-heartedly complains about the disappearance of "real history", the post-Soviet narrator sees all capital-marked history as apocalyptic and "uncomfortable" by definition (140).

The translator-narrator is a true borderline figure, a traveller across a void of different narrative time spaces, who feels marginal or invisible on all sides. The narrative is fragmented, blending motifs from the Parisian metro, pre- and early-modern rural landscapes, and Soviet factories, so that the reader cannot be sure how much of the account "really happened". It also remains ambiguous whether the story is narrated by a man or a woman, or what the narrator's exact origins are: he or she refers to it only as "the country I come from", "eastern Europe", "up north as they say here", or "the Lost World". Indeed, in order not to be treated "as a relative of the dear departed", like at a funeral, the narrator frequently (and successfully) pretends to be Swedish. Yet the nameless Lost

World returns in sudden memories or Proustian sensory associations, dominating the narrator's dreams and nightmares. Furthermore, it is this semi-repressed baggage of memories and feelings that indirectly triggers the murder at the centre of the story.

Death — the crossing of final boundaries — is a persistent figure in *Border Country*. Up north, "death is a great temptation", says the narrator; eastern Europe is "a row of poor and dark countries powerlessly lamenting their still-born history"; Paris may be equally dead, only mummified, and therefore better-looking. The counterforce to death — mummification, forgetting, and final loss of self in fragmentation — is narrative, in being able to tell one's story to someone. The story of self, which makes up most of *Border Country*, is written for the narrator's imaginary Other, called Angelo. The reader first "sees" the narrator when Angelo says to him or her: "You have strange eyes — as if you were observing the world. You're not French, are you?" Thus, as the narrator creates Angelo, Angelo in turn creates the narrator, even if the narrator's identity can be expressed only in partial and negative terms.

All the aforementioned works are united by a variety of ideas and motifs. There is the perception that the legitimate trajectory to adulthood is alien and presupposes estrangement from "home". The fragmentation and lack of resolution of the protagonists' lives points towards the ever-present counter-agencies that impede the development taken for granted by the Western *Bildungsroman*. Furthermore, the protagonist's youthful dreams that an authentic, "true" trajectory is available always end in grave disappointment. In other words, all these texts share a perception of fluidity, fragmentation of self, constraint on legitimate agency and of non-acceptance by a stylized Other. There is also a family resemblance in the manner in which these works, varied in space and time as they are, conceptualize and rationalize this life-experience. All of them — Gombrowicz's human comedy on the mechanisms of identity construction; Kundera's poisonous account of Romantic grand narratives; Milosz's and Tode's hybrid inconclusive life-journeys — in some form deny the Enlightenment-Romantic Historicist model of self-fulfilment. For them, if one manages to construct a "life story" of any coherence, it is a record of stressful negotiations through many particularized small narratives, rather than the teleological revelation of one grand narrative. This is what makes the eastern European idea of *Bildung* structurally, if not necessarily in content, similar to that of the postcolonial cultures outside Europe.

¹ Bill Ashcroft et al., *Key-Concepts in Post-Colonial Studies*, London: Routledge 1998, 186.

² See Diana Brydon's introduction to *Postcolonialism: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, London: Routledge 2000, 1–27.

³ Alfred J. López, *Posts and Pasts: A theory of postcolonialism*, New York: State University of New York Press 2001, 7.

⁴ This is supported by the generality of Anne McClintock's definition of colonization, widely quoted and accepted in postcolonial reference works: the appropriation and exploitation of another geopolitical territory, together with an organized interference in its rule and culture. See eg Peter Childs and Peter Williams, *An Introduction to Post-Colonial Theory*, Prentice Hall 1997.

⁵ Ireland is another case in point. Irish Studies have made extensive use of postcolonial thought for some time, without anyone, until relatively recently, trying much to consider the implications.

⁶ See György Schöpflin, "Nationhood, modernity, democracy", *Vikerkaar* 10–11/2005, Tallinn, 97–108.

⁷ Ewa M. Thompson, *Imperial Knowledge: Russian Literature and Colonialism*, Greenwood Press 2000.

- ⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London: Routledge 1989.
- ⁹ Homi K. Bhabha, "Representation and the Colonial Text: A Critical Exploration Of Some Forms Of Mimeticism", in: Frank Gloversmith (ed.), *The Theory Of Reading*, Harvester 1984, 93–120.
- ¹⁰ See Martin Swales, *The German Bildungsroman from Wieland to Hesse*, Princeton University Press 1978.
- ¹¹ Alfred J. López, *Posts and Pasts: A theory of postcolonialism*, State University of New York Press 2001.
- ¹² Wangari wa Nyatetu Waigwa *The Liminal Novel: Studies In the Francophone–African Novel As Bildungsroman*, Peter Lang 1996.
- ¹³ Witold Gombrowicz, *Three novels*, Grove Press 1978.
- ¹⁴ Milan Kundera, *Life Is Elsewhere*, Alfred. A. Knopp 1974.
- ¹⁵ Emil Tode, *Piiririk*, Tuum 1993.

Published 2006–03–28

Original in Estonian

Contribution by Vikerkaar

First published in *Vikerkaar* 10–11/2005 (Estonian version)

© Piret Peiker/Vikerkaar

© Eurozine