



Endre Bojtár (1940 – 2018)

We called him The Master. We called him so strictly in his absence, and only among ourselves. For with his bitter irony and witty sarcasm he would have smashed any of us to pieces for using such pompous expressions. If there is such a thing in this world as a natural born addict—he was one. He was addicted to languages and purity in style—to his native Hungarian as well as to the other dozens of languages he spoke; he was passionate about high quality in all relevant things in life—literature, music, scholarly texts, wine and gastronomy. He was fully devoted to the virtual homeland—first he called it Central and Eastern Europe, later the Baltics—he had created and intellectually furnished for himself; and he was

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fully convinced of the almighty power of rationality in thinking and liberal democracy as a political system. These were the intellectual and psychological landmarks of his existence and work, and hence these landmarks constituted the innermost framework for our professional development.

It would be hard to properly define his field of academic interest—probably the right expression in the English-speaking scholarly environment would be an interdisciplinary approach based on Comparative Cultural Studies with some elements of Regional Studies and Social History. There are, however, two unquestionable facts about him. The first is that all his research in one way or another was related to what he called Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The second is that he had an extraordinary instinct from the very beginning of his career to arrive as a pioneer in an unknown academic field, then to explore, describe and cultivate it, and after providing the major points of reference, to leave the rest of the job to further generations of scholars. He wrote the first monographs ever on Central Eastern European avant-garde literature and on Czech and Polish structuralism in literary science in the 1960s, and published them in the 1970s already as a research fellow at the Institute for Literary Science of the Hungarian Academy of Science, where he worked as head of the Department of Central and Eastern European Literatures until his retirement in 2010. Between 1977 and 1980 he was appointed associate professor at the University of Szeged, where he read courses on Central and Eastern European literature and met some of his future disciples and fellows of the Budapest School of Comparative Literature, again founded by him. In the late 1980s his interest turned to Baltic cultures, he added Latvian and Lithuanian to the already long list of languages he spoke (all the Slavic plus English, French and German) and in 1989 published another pioneering book documenting the Soviet occupation of the Baltic States. Later on he became an initiator and founder of a discipline which he named Baltistics, and in his academic doctoral dissertation he laid down the foundations of the new field. (In English: *Foreword to the Past. Cultural History of the Baltic People*. Bojtár, 1999a).

The Baltic monograph is considered the highest academic achievement in his oeuvre, however, I must admit that the choice is disturbingly rich. Once he remarked that writing for him had always been torture. Nonetheless, his virtuosity in Hungarian stylistics was legendary, the ability to translate difficult theoretical and literary texts in a clear and understandable way was exemplary for several generations. And he was one of the few in humanities in Central and Eastern Europe who could re-publish all his academic essays after the change of the political system without changing anything for ideological reasons. Let me just mention some figures: from the 1960s he published 20 monographs and volumes of selected studies, six of which

were in foreign languages, 14 edited and seven translated volumes as well as a thousand-page-long Lithuanian-Hungarian Dictionary with which he solely spent seven years. When asked once about his working method, he replied laconically: “If I was about to measure my activities, the quantity definitely would support my position: I was simply diligent”. However, the real moral of his exceptional personality is revealed rather in the sentences after this bon mot: “If you asked me what is the value of this stack of paper I would answer: I have no illusions in this respect—its value is not too high. The researcher of small cultures is permanently in doubt whether or not his work makes sense. The only source of power for him is the conviction that there is no other way to act, for only a better understanding of each other may liberate us from the slavery of hatred”.

Master, for now I feel free to call you so, rest in peace!

Péter Krasztev

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