

Literature in Totalitarian Regimes: Confrontation, Autonomy, Survival. Edited by RODICA ILIE, ADRIAN LACATUS, and ANDREI BODIU. Pp. 316. Brasov: Transilvania University Press. 2011. Cloth. ISBN: 9789735989873.

Literature in Totalitarian Regimes presents the proceedings of a 2011 international conference organized by Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania. Most of the studies in this volume are written in English, with a few notable exceptions in French and Italian. This may seem like an odd decision on the part of the editors, yet it highlights a particular feature of East European Studies, namely the cultural and linguistic differences standing in the way of an overarching scholarly approach. The book and the conference attempt to bridge this gap, by initiating an interpretive dialogue across this particular cultural space. Eastern Europe is, of course, a more or less artificial construct. Nevertheless, in order to understand the events that occurred in the countries that we now gather under this name, we need to turn our attention toward such cross-cultural, ultimately transnational, interpretive attempts. From this point of view, *Literature in Totalitarian Regimes* is a welcome addition to East European scholarship.

The main aim of this volume is to investigate the possible connections between the ways literature and politics gained legitimacy during the twentieth century, whilst keeping a close eye on specific historical circumstances. The common theoretical background of all of the studies differs from traditional socio-political approaches (such as those of Weber, Bourdieu, and Habermas) by discussing the construction of legitimacy from the point of view of the subject, especially the creative subject. In this case, it is that of the writer forced to perform his or her art in a particularly oppressive social context.

The volume is structured in order to facilitate a linear reading, moving from large contextual perspectives on cultural and political control behind the Iron Curtain to case studies underlining the ethical, ideological, or aesthetic tensions within particular fields of cultural production. Although none of the studies in this book mention De Certeau, they seem to be an excellent illustration of his particular way of constructing the difference between resistance and revolution, tactics and strategies. In speaking of writing literature in a totalitarian regime, we may find ourselves tempted to overuse the opposition between dissenters and ideologues. Outside of overt dissent, there seems only to be the question of giving in or giving up. *Literature in Totalitarian Regimes* challenges this assumption by arguing and showing, through its individual studies, how this particular opposition can give rise to sites of resistance. People continue to operate and find ways of everyday resistance to power outside of revolutionary impulses. Most of the studies in this book find that literary resistance is expressed by an aesthetic turn in the cultivation of the literary beautiful, of otherworldly spaces, or of the surreal and the arbitrary grotesque.

A surprising cross-cultural connection comes from Laurynas Katkus's study on Polish, Lithuanian, and former Soviet authors and their particular humour and use of the grotesque. The surprise comes not just from Katkus's study itself, but also from

reading this contribution alongside Romanian ones (Andrei Bodiú's). We thus have several cultures that seem to have little in common in national terms, yet they prove to belong to the same cultural space informed by similar experiences of totalitarianism and with similar everyday responses to it. Entropy, the dissolution of the individual, the dissolution and mystification of reality, united by a light-hearted, yet dark humour, seem to be common sites of resistance in all of these different national cultures.

On another note, we may observe inter-cultural tensions in minority literatures during this period – tensions that eventually amount to the same aesthetic turn. Susana-Monica Tapodi and Vilma-Iren Mihaly's study on Hungarian Romanian literature during this period is particularly revealing of a response to a two-fold power imposition with a certain history of disappointment (communist ideology in Romania did promise equality and freedom, yet Nicolae Ceausescu's nationalist regime delivered anything but that, especially concerning minorities).

This particular aesthetic turn, however, should not be understood in terms of escapism. In fact, without paying attention to the particular tension between official, reality-defining ideology and utopian attempts at writing outside of ideology (a tension underlying many of the studies in this book), the aesthetic turn of literature in former East European totalitarian states cannot be fully understood. Rodica Ilie or Adrian Otoiu's studies, mapping out these particular aesthetic forms, seem to stand proof to this. Poetics becomes anti-mimetic, and the objective becomes subjective, yet still works within given ideological discourses, subverting them through a form of doublespeak. As Adrian Lacatus's study suggests, what will happen to this particular aesthetic turn now that power in these states flows differently remains to be seen.

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