TOMASZ KRUPA
MATEUSZ SKUCHA

CONTEMPORARY SPECTRES OF THE 19TH CENTURY IN THE LITERATURE OF CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

One could metaphorically say that the 19th century was the longest century in human history[1]. It began with the French Revolution in 1789 and ended with the Great War in 1914. This century commenced with Napoleon's actions, spanned the long reigns of Queen Victoria and Emperor Franz Joseph, and concluded symbolically with the sinking of the Titanic. It was a time of dramatic political changes (the fall of aristocracy, the rise of capitalism), social changes (women's emancipation, the dispossession of peasants), economic changes (the industrial boom), geographical changes (the expansion of colonialism, the popularisation of travel), technical advancements (scientific discoveries and inventions in various fields), and cultural transformations (evolutions in literature and other arts, the beginnings of photography and film). This era saw the emergence of major cultural movements: Romanticism, Realism, and Modernism, characterised by a turn towards individualism and psychology on one hand, and grand social and historical diagnoses on the other. Both poetry and prose, as well as drama, saw rapid development.

The 19th century was also a period of complex situations in Central and Eastern Europe: on one hand, modern concepts of nations were emerging; on the other, many nations lacked their own state. This unique historical context created a shared experience that links the cultures of Central and Eastern Europe, both in the 19th century and in their contemporary reflections on that era. The region's collective struggle for national identity, often in the face of imperial rule, fostered a rich cultural and literary landscape that continues to resonate today.

Moreover, the return to 19th century themes and ideas after the fall of socialist regimes in the late 20th century highlights the enduring influence of this period on the region's cultural imagination. This "long 19th century" has shaped the intellectual and artistic traditions of Central and Eastern Europe in profound ways, creating a common cultural thread that persists despite political boundaries.

While comparative studies of 19th century Western European literatures are well established[2], a similar comprehensive approach to Central and Eastern

[1] See Fernand Braudel, "Histoire et Sciences sociales: La longue durée", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, 13, 1958, 4, pp. 725-753.

[2] See Jean-Claude Caron, Alain Corbin, Michèle Riot-Sarcey, Rosemonde Sanson (eds.), "(Re)penser le XIXe siècle", *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle*, 1996, 13; Sylvie Aprile, Manuel Charpy, Louis Hincker, Judith Lyon-Caen (eds.), "Quel est l'avenir du XIXe siècle?", *Revue d'histoire du XIXe*

European literatures is lacking. This gap in scholarship presents an opportunity for a nuanced exploration of the region's literary heritage. A comparative perspective on the long 19th century in Central and Eastern Europe would not only illuminate the unique characteristics of each national literature but also reveal the interconnections and shared themes that define the region's cultural identities.

This thematic focus is particularly relevant given the complex reception of 19th-century literature in the cultures of the region. Works such as Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe* (1994) and Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* (1997)[3] have explored how the region's image was constructed in Western European discourse, but less attention has been paid to how Central and Eastern European cultures themselves have reinterpreted and reimagined their 19th-century heritage. Notable efforts such as the comprehensive volumes edited by Marcel Cornis-Pope and John Neubauer (2004–2010) or the recent works of Aistė Kučinskienė Viktorija Šeina, Brigita Speičytė (2021)[4] are commendable but remain relatively rare in the academic landscape. These initiatives highlight a growing but still underdeveloped interest in understanding how these cultures internalise, contest, and transform their own historical narratives in response to both past and present cultural dynamics.

In light of these considerations, we must ask: how do we view 19th century Central and Eastern European literatures today? What image of the 19th century literary life in these areas emerges from contemporary reflections on the 19th century? What does 19th century literature mean to us today in the context of Central and Eastern Europe's unique historical trajectory?

The field of inquiry opened by this thematic issue is intentionally broad, reflecting the many ways in which the 19th century continues to shape, unsettle, and inspire literary imagination in Central and Eastern Europe. The contributions assembled here suggest that the 19th century is not a stable object of study but a living constellation of forms, affects, and interpretive frameworks. It may be approached through the continuities and ruptures that link 19th- and 21st-century literatures; through the rewriting of realist and romantic paradigms in contemporary fiction, drama, and poetry; or through the persistence of 19th-century myths in modern biographies, media, and cultural narratives. It may also be revisited through the lenses of today's critical vocabularies – ecocriticism, affect theory, postcolonial and gender studies, or digital and quantitative methodologies – which question how literary history is written, measured, and transmitted. At stake are not only the aesthetic legacies of the century that defined modern Europe, but

siècle, 2013, 47; Dominique Kalifa, "Que reste-t-il du XIXe siècle ?", *Revue d'histoire du XIXe siècle*, 2013, 47, pp. 11-14.

[3] Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994; Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997.

[4] Marcel Cornis-Pope, John Neubauer (eds.), *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe*, vol. 1–4, Amsterdam, John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2004–2010; Aistė Kučinskienė Viktorija Šeina, Brigita Speičytė (eds.), *Literary Canon Formation as Nation-building in Central Europe and the Baltics: 19th to Early 20th Century*, Leiden, Brill, 2021.

also its epistemological and ethical afterlives: how its canons are rebuilt or contested, how its authors are reinterpreted as critics, theorists, or cultural icons, and how its texts circulate anew across borders, languages, and media. This plurality of approaches – comparative, archival, theoretical, or experimental – confirms that the 19th century endures less as a closed period than as a dynamic, evolving dialogue between past and present.

The diversity of this issue reflects not only the multiplicity of the 19th century itself but also the variety of scholarly traditions and perspectives from which it is examined. The contributors – affiliated with universities and research centres across France, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, and beyond – approach Central and Eastern Europe's shared cultural space through distinct national, linguistic, and methodological lenses. Their studies move between comparative literary history and digital humanities, between feminist, postcolonial, and performative approaches, tracing how the same 19th-century questions – of nation, modernity, and identity – reappear differently across local contexts. This plurality of voices and disciplines transforms the issue into a genuinely transnational conversation about what the 19th century continues to mean today.

The opening section, "Revisiting National Canons", engages directly with the guiding question of this issue: how does the 19th century continue to haunt the cultural and political imagination of Central and Eastern Europe? The authors gathered here explore the "afterlives" of national canons – their spectral persistence in the languages, myths, and affective economies that still structure the region's collective identities. Their essays approach the long 19th century not as a completed epoch, but as a repertoire of unresolved narratives and performative gestures that resurface in the present under new ideological, gendered, and epistemological forms.

Ioana Bot and Ioana Moroșan both situate contemporary Romanian nationalism within this longue durée of inherited symbolic models. In "The Myth of the National Poet, Used in the Present Romanian Political Discourse. What Is New?", Bot examines how Mihai Eminescu's image as Romania's "national poet" remains a touchstone for defining the boundaries of belonging. Through the analysis of political discourse and commemorative practice, she exposes how Romantic mythology continues to sustain modern populist rhetoric and the rhetoric of cultural sovereignty. Moroșan's "From Revolutionary Patriotic Mothers to the Contemporary Nationalist Discourse" extends this inquiry into the gendered dimension of the national myth. By comparing the maternal allegories of 1848 with those in present-day conservative and nationalist movements, she demonstrates how the symbolic figure of the "mother of the nation" has survived as both an instrument of emancipation and a means of ideological control. Taken together, their essays illustrate how the 19th century's affective and gendered patterns of nationalism are not merely inherited but actively re-performed in post-communist Romania.

Nikol Dziub's "Spectres, simulacres, saxifrages et *sopilky*: Lessia Oukraïnka comme revenante dans les discours engagés du XXIe siècle ukrainien" moves the discussion eastward, to a country where the haunting of the 19th century has taken

on renewed urgency. Dziub analyses the spectral "afterlife" of Lesya Ukrainka in contemporary Ukraine – her transformation into a revenant figure invoked by politicians, artists, and feminist intellectuals as a symbol of both resistance and continuity. By exploring how current political and cultural movements reenact the emancipatory ideals of Ukrainka's time, Dziub reveals a form of historical repetition that blurs the boundary between commemoration and reactivation, between the ghosts of the 19th century and the unfinished struggles of the 21st.

The Russian case, examined by Catherine Géry in "Le canon littéraire du XIXe siècle russe à l'épreuve de la guerre: que faire des spectres de Pouchkine et de Dostoïevski après février 2022?", exposes another aspect of this haunting. The war in Ukraine has forced a radical reassessment of the Russian 19th-century canon, long imagined as universal and morally redemptive. Géry traces the epistemological and generational shifts within French Russian studies as scholars grapple with the imperial underpinnings of Pushkin's and Dostoevsky's legacies. Her contribution points to a broader issue central to today's humanities: the need to confront the ghosts of empire that continue to structure literary modernity.

Zoltán Kulcsár-Szabó's "Swearing an Oath by Shouting the Poem. Petőfi and Performative Language in Poetry" revisits another foundational moment of the 19th-century imagination: the revolution of 1848 as an act of linguistic creation. Through a performative reading of Sándor Petőfi's *Nemzeti dal*, Kulcsár-Szabó explores how poetic language could generate collective agency, turning speech into political event. His essay reconsiders the Romantic myth of authorship as an act of nation-building – a legacy whose performative energy still informs the ways modern Central Europe conceives the relation between art, speech, and freedom.

Finally, Ewa Paczoska's "The Polish 19th Century in the Mirror of Twenty-First-Century Literature – The Meanders of Neighbouring", included in the "Documents" section of this issue as a revised and updated translation from Polish, returns to the Polish context, where the 19th century appears less as a memory than as "a troublesome neighbour". By examining contemporary rewritings and ironic appropriations of Romantic motifs, Paczoska shows how modern Polish literature oscillates between fascination and fatigue, parody and reverence, in its dialogue with the Romantic legacy. The persistence of messianic and martyrdom tropes underscores how deeply the emotional structures of the 19th century remain woven into Poland's cultural self-understanding.

The section "(Semi)Peripheral Realisms" turns to the 19th century's most persistent aesthetic formation – realism – and examines how it continues to structure our understanding of representation, emotion, and modernity. Across Central and Eastern Europe, realism has always been a mode of negotiation rather than consensus: a way of mediating between visibility and exclusion, social observation and self-reflection, the desire for progress and the persistence of inherited hierarchies. The essays collected here trace this tension within distinct but interconnected traditions, showing how the realist impulse – its vocabulary of everyday life, its grammar of interiority, its rhetoric of truth – still reverberates through today's critical and methodological debates.

Maria Chiorean's "Emotional Excess and Racialisation in the 19th-Century Romanian Novel" reconsiders the realist novel as a key medium through which ethnicity and affect were codified in the emerging Romanian nation. Drawing on critical race theory and digital corpus analysis, she traces the ways in which representations of Roma characters in 19th-century fiction functioned as emotional and moral markers, shaping hierarchies of belonging. The realist claim to authenticity, Chiorean demonstrates, often rested upon forms of racialised feeling that mirrored the contradictions of the emerging nation-state.

Gábor Palkó's "The Relative Frequency of Inner-Life Verbs as Signifier of Change in 19th- and 20th-Century Fiction? Distant Reading of a Corpus of Hungarian Novels" shifts from the ideological to the methodological plane, testing how new digital tools can illuminate long-term transformations in narrative consciousness. Through a large-scale computational analysis of Hungarian novels, Palkó examines the changing linguistic representation of interiority – the so-called "inward turn" of modern prose. His work situates distant reading within the tension between the quantitative and the interpretive, showing how digital humanities revisit the very questions raised by 19th-century realism: the relation between observation and empathy, surface and depth, the collective and the individual.

A broader historical canvas is drawn by Benedikts Kalnačs in "The Historical Contexts and Aesthetic Self-Reflexiveness of 19th-Century Latvian Literary Realism". His reconstruction of realism in the Baltic provinces situates Latvian literature at the intersection of secularisation, the rise of literacy, and the cultural ambitions of the "New Latvians". Rather than casting the realist programme as an import from the European centres, Kalnačs emphasises its adaptive and self-aware nature. Realism, in this way, becomes a vehicle for articulating cultural autonomy and for positioning Latvian letters within an asymmetric and multilingual literary field – a semi-peripheral contribution to world literature that is both derivative and distinctively local.

Ágnes Hansági's "Mór Jókai, a Contemporary of Pierre Ménard: Metafiction, Hypotyposis and Metalepsis in Jókai's Prose of the 1880s" closes the section by turning realism inside out. Re-examining Jókai's late prose through the lenses of narratology and modernist theory, Hansági uncovers its metafictional complexity and self-referential irony. The interplay between visual vividness (hypotyposis) and narrative self-consciousness (metalepsis) reveals Jókai not as a belated realist but as a proto-modernist experimenting with the limits of representation. The realist text anticipates its own deconstruction, blurring the boundary between realism and modernism that has long structured literary historiography.

In the spirit of this thematic issue's central concern with the "contemporary spectres" of the 19th century, the section "Private Spaces, Public Matters" turns toward the intimate settings where the modern subject was first imagined – and where its afterimages still linger. The essays collected here trace how the domestic sphere, personal writing, and collaborative authorship became both products and producers of 19th-century modernity. Far from being peripheral to public life, these private forms of expression reveal how interiority itself was politicised: the household as a microcosm of social order, the diary as a medium of historical

consciousness, and literary collaboration as a negotiation with gendered hierarchies of authorship.

Each study in this section re-examines the 19th century from within its most personal textures. Anna Pekaniec's "19th-Century Polish Women's Literature of Personal Document – 21st-Century Reception" revisits diaries and memoirs by Polish women writers as archives of experience that challenge the separation between private and public memory. By showing how 21st-century feminist scholarship re-reads these texts as acts of self-definition, Pekaniec exposes the persistence of 19th-century models of authorship and emotion in today's cultural historiography.

Alina Bako's "Translocal Modernism: The Role of Private Spaces in Shaping Narrative Dynamics" investigates how domestic interiors – Flaubert's bourgeois rooms and Papadat-Bengescu's urban apartments – translate the aesthetic and ideological tensions of the "long 19th century" into narrative form. In her reading, private space becomes a translocal engine of literary modernity, connecting the Western canon and the Romanian periphery through shared anxieties about individuality, class, and modernisation.

Cătălina Stanislav's "Hardly a Room of One's Own. Gender and Collaborative Writing in the Prewar Romanian Novel" reconsiders the social foundations of authorship itself. Exploring mixed-gender and female-female collaborations in early Romanian fiction, she uncovers how the first women novelists negotiated visibility within patriarchal literary institutions. Their co-authored texts, oscillating between dependence and defiance, expose another "spectre" of the 19th century – the persistent association between creative legitimacy and masculine authority.

Taken together, the essays in this issue show that the 19th century persists less as a distant historical formation than as what Ewa Paczoska aptly calls a "troublesome neighbour" whose presence is continually negotiated: sometimes welcomed, sometimes resisted, frequently reinterpreted. Its spectres circulate through political rhetoric, cultural myths, new methodological perspectives, and the intimate spaces of literary imagination. By tracing the shifting forms of this neighbourly presence, the contributions gathered here reveal how the 19th century continues to inhabit – and at times unsettle – the cultural present of Central and Eastern Europe. We hope that this collection will encourage further reflection on the many ways in which this long century still lives beside us.