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CENTRAL EUROPE AS AN ARTISTIC CATEGORY: A NEUROSIS AND SENSITIVITY¹

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Abstract: Urszula Górską, CENTRAL EUROPE AS AN ARTISTIC CATEGORY. NEUROSIS AND SENSITIVITY. "PORÓWNANIA" 8, 2011, Vol. VIII, p. , ISSN 1733-165X. The article shows the Central European region from a perspective of artistic, mental and cultural community. In this area we may distinguish a common sensitivity while reading cultural and literature texts. This specific sensitivity is being dictated by a common historical experience, e.g. the Ottoman threat, the Habsburg Monarchy, Second World War, the Holocaust, the communist system. The author reports different opinions of many writers from the region – Milan Kundera, György Konrád, Czesław Miłosz – on Central European identity. What does it really mean to be a Central European?

Abstrakt: Urszula Górską, EUROPA ŚRODKOWA JAKO KATEGORIA ARTYSTYCZNA. NEUROZA I WRAŻLIWOŚĆ. „PORÓWNANIA” 8, 2011, Vol. VIII, s. , ISSN 1733-165X. Artykuł przedstawia region Europy Środkowej z perspektywy wspólnoty artystycznej, kulturowej, mentalnej. Można w tym obszarze wyróżnić wspólną wrażliwość w czytaniu znaków kulturowych czy literackich. Tę wrażliwość dyktowałyby świadomość wspólnych doświadczeń historycznych, takich jak zagrożenie osmańskie, monarchia habsburska, II wojna, *Holocaust*, system komunistyczny. Autorka referuje poglądy wielu pisarzy regionu, takich jak Milan Kundera, György Konrád, Czesław Miłosz na temat tożsamości środkowoeuropejskiej. Co to, według nich, znaczy być Środkowoeuropejczykiem?

According to many contemporary scholars, Central Europe is first and foremost not so much a geographical area but rather a mental and cultural phenomenon, one that shares ‘a sensitivity to reading cultural or literary signs originating in this geographical region’³. This

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³ S.H. Kaszyński, *Summa vitae Austriacae. Szkice o literaturze austriackiej*. Poznań 1999, p. 15.

sensitivity would in principle be born out of the awareness of common history. According to Stefan Kaszyński, external hazards have triggered a shared fear of non-existence in the peoples of Central Europe, a fear that can be best seen in the literature of the region. Therefore many intellectuals consider Central Europe as a literary, utopian world, a ‘poetic homeland of extendable topography, where authors consciously set their works’⁴.

The peoples of the region have never been the masters of their lives, as Milan Kundera aptly points out in *The Curtain*; rather than that, they were passive objects of History: ‘Their unity was unintentional. They were kin to one another not through will, not through fellow-feeling or linguistic proximity, but by reason of similar experience, by reason of common historical situations that brought them together at different times, in different configurations, and within shifting, never definite borders’⁵.

The shifting and naturally open frontiers of the region that have determined its history were likewise indicated by Peter Stirk. To him, the Danube, the Vistula or the Carpathians do not constitute natural borders or demarcation lines, but freely traverse the area, thereby influencing its geographical diversity and the resultant state of permanent external risks. Thus the region resembles a live ‘organism with vertebrae and arteries, yet without the outer shell’⁶, whose absence exposes it to countless wounds. The ‘political vulnerability’ moreover arose from a mixture of two opposing tendencies characteristic of *Mitteleuropa*: a supra-national unifying inclination born out of the conviction that a region called ‘Central Europe’ can be delineated, and the exclusive tendency for autonomy that is symptomatic for the nations of this region. Narrowing down Peter Stirk’s observations to a few major issues, the uniqueness of Central Europe in the 19th c. and in the first half of the 20th c. was born primarily out of the following:

- ethnic heterogeneity that operates along class distinction lines
- lack of national and social stability
- long-term economic recession and backwardness in comparison to the dynamic Western states
- unifying, supra-national tendencies

⁴ M. Bodrožić, *Europa Środkowa, wirtualna tęsknota*. Transl. into Polish by E. Czerwiakowska, W.W. Ronge. “Kafka. Kwartalnik Środkowoeuropejski” 2001, No 2, p. 56.

⁵ M. Kundera, *The Curtain. An Essay in Seven Parts*. Transl. from the French by Linda Asher. New York 2005, p. 43.

⁶ A. Palmer’s term [quoted after:] P. Stirk, *The Idea of Mitteleuropa*, in: *Mitteleuropa. History and Prospects*. Ed. P. Stirk. Edinburgh 1994, p. 1.

- struggle for independence of the stateless nations
- ‘neurotic’ structure of the region, or the openness of borders, responsible for numerous external hazards, an absence of an outer safeguard against the consequences of the machinations of ‘great politics’, vulnerability to History⁷

The characteristic feature of Central European mentality is the incessant drive for freedom, opposition to any authoritarian imposition of values, similar value systems, and a similar kind of reflexive thinking. The Ottoman threat and the co-existence of Christianity and Judaism determined the uniqueness of the region. The historical events that had dramatic ramifications for the entire region included the decline of the Habsburg monarchy in 1918, the October Revolution in Russia, the Holocaust, and the fall of communism in 1989. It is precisely these experiences that developed the sensitivity of Central European writers⁸. Drago Jančar, a Slovenian author and essayist, is of the same opinion. According to him, the underlying experience of Central Europeans is the experience of totalitarianism and resistance to it: ‘After all, Mr. Cogito from Zbigniew Herbert’s poems might be Slovenian, but not French’⁹.

The decline of monarchy that, as Mieczysław Dąbrowski claims, led to a crisis of culture at the turn of the 20th c.¹⁰ and was diagnosed by such contemporary thinkers as Otto Spengler, Witkacy and José Ortega y Gasset, ushered in the process of mythologizing the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in literature. The fall of nineteenth-century order, the ultimate demise of the patriarchal and feudal system, the decline of institutions and authority obliterated completely the axiological universe of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, which survived only in the memories of the inhabitants and cultural texts, including the literature of the region.

Artistic pluralism

Historically, studies on the region of Central Europe have greatly emphasised aesthetic and cultural factors. According to Andrzej Szczerski, the re-discovery of the area allowed its

⁷ Our region’s vulnerability to historical wounds is mentioned likewise by Milan Kundera in the text *Die Tragödie Mitteleuropas*, in: *Aufbruch nach Mitteleuropa. Rekonstruktion eines versunkenen Kontinents*. Ed. E. Busek, G. Wilfinger. Wien 1986, p. 137.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 16.

⁹ A. Kaczorowski, *Europa z płaskostopiem*. Collab. T. Maćkowiak. Wołowiec 2006, p. 204.

¹⁰ M. Dąbrowski, *Kryzys i rozpad monarchii habsburskiej w świetle polskiej i niemieckojęzycznej literatury XX wieku*, in: *Symbioza kultur słowiańskich i niesłowiańskich w Europie Środkowej*. Ed. M. Bobrownicka. Kraków 1996, p. 139-140.

perception as a centre of vibrant artistic life, which diminished the significance of the capital of France as the capital of the arts. Traditionally, art history focused mainly on Paris as a centre of culture whose impact spread over the rest of Europe. For Szczerski, in turn, the late 19th century and the early 20th initiated an ‘artistic’ isolation of our region from the capital of France. Central European studies have debunked the dominant position of Paris and have offset the traditional (Western European and American) historiography, with their strong axiological bent and their binary opposition of the centre and the peripheries¹¹. Outside the interest of traditional historiography was the multifaceted dynamism of artistic projects in the Eastern part of the continent. Here it was by no means Paris that was the principal source of inspiration but rather regional centres whose artistic activities were autonomous and independent with respect to that of the ‘centre’: ‘Central Europe appears as a full-fledged participant of the European dialogue, making original ideological choices and not always dependent on the dictate of central cities’¹². Significantly, then, of major importance in the region were both local centres, relations between them and the tension between those cities and international centres that had an impact on the culture of the region, i.e. Berlin, Munich and Vienna on the one hand and Russia on the other.

As Andrzej Szczerski observes, Central Europe lacked in major centres of civilisation and was dominated mainly by smaller towns whose artistic and intellectual traditions had continued for many centuries¹³. Relations between them and major international centres gave rise to completely new phenomena unique for the Central European model, a synthesis of two kinds of influences, the local and the central one. On the other hand, as the author fittingly observes, the peripheries would not have been able to participate in the intellectual and artistic communication without the intermediary of the centre. Therefore, it was in Paris, Rome, Berlin, and Munich that artists learned about new artistic currents, but then transformed them in their own work, taking into account the local uniqueness of their place of origin, customs, spiritual climate, and the specificity of the area. In this way official art made in the West was creatively transformed by artists ‘from the province’ and began to operate outside the canon, outside the mainstream, thus acquiring a critical and re-valuing dimension:

The peripheries become, then, a zone of tension between the normative and what questions the norm. The binary models such as ‘centre – province’ or ‘universal West – particular East’ are therefore

¹¹ A. Szczerski, *Wzorce tożsamości. Recepcja sztuki brytyjskiej w Europie Środkowej około roku 1900*. Kraków 2002, p. 11.

¹² Ibidem, p. 12.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 37.

dislodged once more as falsifying the actual tension generated by the constant exchange of ideas between the norm-text and its criticism-margin¹⁴.

Central European culture has for centuries oscillated between the myth of Western universalism and the stereotype of Eastern parochialism, in reality combining both paradigms, whose tangle constitutes to my mind the very 'essence' of the region. After 1989, Central Europe ceased to be perceived as a *dominium* of German and Russian political interests; instead, a pursuit of a common cultural and historical identity of the region began. Therefore, Czesław Miłosz and Milan Kundera, among others, opposed decisively the vision of our region as exclusively a zone of influence of political superpowers. The authors demanded a search for a regional historical unity that would contribute to the Central European identification of the area. Therefore in his essay Kundera enumerated such watershed moments for Central Europe as the foundation of Prague University (1348) and Jagiellonian University (1364), the Hussite revolution, the growing power of the Habsburg dynasty, wars with Turkey, the Counter-Reformation, and such artistic phenomena as the development of Central European Baroque:

But from whatever perspective one looks at it, a common history emerges; looking out from the Czech window I see there in the mid-fourteenth century the first Central European university at Prague; in the fifteenth century I see the Hussite revolution foreshadowing the Reformation; in the seventeenth century I see the Hapsburg Empire gradually constructing itself of Bohemia, Hungary, Austria; I see the wars that, over two centuries, will defend the West against the Turkish invasion; I see the Counter-Reformation with the flowering of baroque art that stamps an architectural unity on the whole of that vast territory right up to the Baltic countries¹⁵.

It transpires from the above quote that Central Europe may also be discussed in terms of aesthetic unity, which was dominated in the 17th century by the unsettling Baroque art and two centuries later by Romantic poetry, while France was under the sway of Classicism and then of an era of great realistic novels. Both Kundera and Kaszyński perceive this European antithesis of styles as a contrast of two divergent philosophic and existential paradigms. France became a secularised Mecca of rationalism and libertinism, while Central Europe was dominated by the spirit of religious metaphysics, ecstatic emotionality and irrationalism, which influenced to a greater or lesser degree the music composed by eminent Central European composers such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Frederic Chopin, Ferenc Liszt, later also by Béla Bartók, Anton Webern, Alban Berg, and Arnold Schönberg. In his text about the music of the region¹⁶ Moritz Csáky demonstrates its unique nature inextricably connected

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 44.

¹⁵ M. Kundera, *The Curtain*, op. cit., p. 46.

¹⁶ The author includes into Central Europe first of all the Habsburg monarchy and the German Empire. M. Csáky, *Gesamtregion und Musik. Akkulturation in Mitteleuropa am Beispiel von Musik*, in: *Mitteleuropa –*

with the plurality of ethnic and folklore elements that determine configurations of sounds and with its openness to exotic (Gypsy, Hungarian) inspirations in the Viennese operetta. Csáky is of the opinion that Mozart's 'subtle mixed style' may have developed under the influence of the atmosphere of Vienna, where different social strata such as aristocracy, the middle class, burghers, and craftsmen lived in closer proximity to one another than in any other metropolis. This led to the emergence of innovative music, based on eclectic pluralism, a music that builds *social bridges*¹⁷, as in the *Don Giovanni* opera by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, combining comic and serious elements.

According to the author, especially the Viennese *opera buffa* was the best example of such an innovative music genre (with Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro* as its ultimate manifestation) which departed from the elitist and stiff *opera seria* towards a more egalitarian kind of entertainment, open to the general public. Typical of *opera buffa* was, among others, a comic plot, an ordinary, everyday setting, the prevalence of the male bass (so-called *buffo bass*) over the soprano, the use of local dialects and less sophisticated melody lines. Its plot revolved most often around mundane yet hilarious misunderstandings, *quid pro quo* machinations meant for a less refined yet more extensive public of all walks of life.

Vienna was also the cradle of a totally independent music 'revolution' of a later date, i.e. the 'avant-garde' of the Second School of Vienna, represented mainly by Arnold Schönberg, Alban Berg and Anton Webern, who broke free from the traditional principle of tonality. Is it a matter of coincidence that it was in the capital of the former Habsburg monarchy that the idea of the pluralism of a compositional technique was born, based on the negation of privileging certain sounds to the detriment of others through stressing the importance of each single tone? Is it a matter of coincidence that music based on all the sounds of the scale was born here, in the heart of a multinational metropolis?

I believe we can point out a certain analogy between – on a 'macrocosmic' scale – the Central European idea of equality of all nations, religions and cultures of the monarchy, and on a microcosmic scale – a subconscious implementation of this project in art by equalising all tones and thus arriving at a pluralist unity. Interestingly, though, the music of the area was not limited exclusively to its 'social' innovativeness (*opera buffa*) or a formal one (dodecaphony). It was moreover based on a uniquely dramatic expressiveness and emotions developed by Romanticism, strongly rooted in this part of Europe also in music.

Idee, Wissenschaft und Kultur im 19 und 20 Jahrhundert: Beiträge aus österreichischer und ungarischer Sicht.
Red. R.G. Plaschka, H. Haselsteiner, A.M. Drabek. Wien 1997.

¹⁷ Ibidem, p. 124.

Apart from music, the above dramatic expressiveness and emotionality were evident especially in the visual arts, sculpture, painting, and architecture. The last area was dominated in the 17th c. by Baroque style, and between 1830-1914, as Ilona Sármány-Parsons notes, by a style known as historicism,¹⁸ consisting in the imitation of old architectural styles and their combinations (eclecticism). Importantly, the style was inspired by Romantic literature and art, flourishing at that time, and opposed the cold Classicism mainly of France, where the power of rationalism helped the development of primarily written reflection, i.e. literature and philosophy¹⁹. To simplify things, the 'soul' of Europe was stretched on an axis whose extremes were French rationalism and a cult of liberal freedom and classicism on the one hand and Central European fascination with the mystery of being and a pursuit of a world of unreal possibilities on the other.

In the early 20th century *Art Nouveau* was the dominant style of architecture of the major cities of the Habsburg monarchy. A style of the enlightened bourgeoisie, it had a powerful impact on urban architecture and flourished mainly in Vienna, Budapest, Prague, Krakow, and Lviv, which became at the same time new capitals of Central European innovativeness²⁰. The turn of the century demonstrated an extremely high level of the applied arts of the region, thus adding to the artistic and cultural heritage of the continent the interesting examples of lesser known centres, constituting an original synthesis of universal trends in art and of local determinants²¹. Emil Brix censured scholars from Western Europe, who when discussing Central European Secession focused mainly on the art and architecture of Vienna. However, many exquisite examples of *Art Nouveau* could be also found in other, smaller cities of the region such as Trieste, Ljubljana, Bratislava, Prague, and Budapest²².

Still, it was principally in Vienna that such a powerful artistic eruption took place. This was conditioned by a number of various factors: a sense of an imminent disintegration of the monarchy, mounting ethnic conflicts, political competition between the different nations, strong nationalist movements, and last but not least, a multinational structure of artistic dialogue. Artists became part and parcel of nationalist identity projects, which did not always corresponded to their inner drive for freedom. Gustav Mahler regarded himself as Czech,

¹⁸ I. Sármány-Parsons, *Wahlverwandschaften in der Architektur des Historismus in der Donaumonarchie* [in:] *Mitteleuropa – Idee...* op. cit., p. 145.

¹⁹ M. Kundera, *Die Tragödie Mitteleuropas...* op. cit., p. 139.

²⁰ R. Salvadori, *Mitologia nowoczesności*. Transl. into Polish by H. Kralowa. Warszawa 2004, p. 183.

²¹ J. Purchla, *Wstęp*, in: *Sztuka około 1900 roku w Europie Środkowej. Centra i prowincje artystyczne*. Red. P. Krakowski, J. Purchla. Kraków 1997, p. 8.

²² E. Brix, *Struktura dialogu artystycznego pomiędzy Wiedniem a innymi ośrodkami miejskimi w monarchii habsburskiej około roku 1900*, in: *Sztuka około roku 1900...* op. cit., p. 10.

Austrian, German, and Jew, and thus any attempt at a definite national identification must have seemed to him excessively oppressive and inadequate to his identity.

The conflict between politics and ethics, perpetrated by the fluid configurations of national and cultural pluralism, was the *differentia specifica* of Central Europe. Nevertheless, despite its being, as Brix demonstrates, a world of constant conflict and tension, it was characterised by an artistic striving for harmony in the form of the Modernist ideal of a synthesis of arts – *Gesamtkunswerk*²³.

The roots of Postmodernism

Modernism and the gradual disintegration of the Habsburg monarchy brought about the attendant sense of an end of history and of Western civilisation. As a result, the Hungarian philosophy historian Kristóf (J.C.) Nyiri interprets the breakthrough intellectual discoveries taking place in Central Europe in the early 20th c. as the first origin of Postmodern reflection. It was initiated in this region by such phenomena as the notion of an anti-metaphysical ‘language game’ put forth by Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, the separation of the ‘psychological subject’ (empirical) and the ‘transcendental subject’ in Edmund Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, Ernst Mach’s research narrowing down ‘identity’ to a complex of memories, moods and emotions, as well as Fritz Mauthner’s theory about thought being bound by language and Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis with its multilevel structure of the subject.

Mitteleuropa as the greatest and most modern European ‘culture centre’ was likewise indicated by Milan Kundera. Vienna was to become, as we know, the place of birth of Freud’s psychoanalysis and of the modern music composed by Mahler, Schönberg and Bartók. In turn, Prague, thanks to the phantasmagoric, grotesque and absurd works by Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hašek, became the greatest ‘counter-weight in the novel’ with respect to the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, where until the 1930s philosophical and discursive literary texts were written, such as the novels by Robert Musil (*The Man Without Qualities*) and Hermann Broch (*Sleepwalkers*). Moreover, it was in Prague that after 1918 the intellectual dynamism of non-German-speaking countries peaked. This was the place of origin of the Prague School of Structuralism (1926-1948), set up by the Prague Linguistic Circle. In turn, in the 1930s in Poland Witold Gombrowicz, Bruno Schulz and Stanisław Witkiewicz paved the way for European avant-garde, especially for the theatre of the absurd.

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Ibidem, p. 16.

In turn, the Hungarian art historian Ákos Moravánszky indicated in Central European architecture and art the tensions typical of the entire region, such as: ‘a lack of correlation between the architecture of early Modernism and rationalism, the irrational nature of Central European utopia ..., a co-existence of austerity and richness of form, Eros and Thanatos, East and West, national questions and social progress’. The different clashing social projects, utopias and political agendas were reflected in the Modernist art of the region.

Was the creative explosion of the region but a geographical accident? Or rather, as Kundera implies, was it born out of the long tradition of a shared past? Or perhaps did Central Europe, thanks to a separate common history, create its own unique intellectual and artistic culture?

Metropole Wien

The need for establishing a regional capital of culture was indicated by the Austrian politician and writer, Erhard Busek, in his article *Metropole Wien*. Such a Central European centre would play the role of a *Weltstadt* (‘city–world’) or a ‘simultaneous interpreter, an intermediary, a confrontation venue, a moderator’²⁴. Busek assumed that people, politics and the city cannot function well without the right to create utopian visions and long-term projects. According to him, the very essence of human activity consists in awaiting what is to come, a desire to reach out towards the future. A perspective of anticipation, a visionary project of the future would be, then, at the core of urban life as a realm of human existence. Without this ambitious plan underlying all the activities aiming at the development of the city the implementation of the *Weltstadt* project is impossible. However, according to the author, because of the proximity of the city to Central European countries – the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Hungary – Vienna stands a chance of playing the important role of an ‘international intermediary’ in the region. Is this possible, though? Busek inquires whether today’s capital of Austria might once again, after a long time of leading the Habsburg monarchy, play the major role of the cultural centre of Central Europe?

A continuation of the multinational Habsburg tradition might, then, be the pivot of Central European integration, with Vienna being once again the ‘spiritual capital’ as during the time of the *fin de siècle*. The ‘Club pro Wien’ initiative mentioned by Busek might implement a particular cultural policy that would draw on the common historical roots of the region. The idea is to give up passive nostalgia for the sake of an active re-formulation of our

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E. Busek, *Metropole Wien*, in: *Aufbruch nach Mitteleuropa...* op. cit., p. 7.

geo-political position in the name of tightening neighbourly relations and of a free progress of individual entities. The aim of the ‘Club pro Wien’ program would be ‘to combat inertia and spiritual idleness and to wage war on the insular existence of the Austrians’²⁵. According to Busek, to abandon the project invariably means to become provincial once again: ‘A city, especially a metropolis, should never be a place of peace and quiet but a venue of meeting, debate, diversity, creative impulse, and conflict. This is no doubt very exhausting, but we do not live in this world to take a rest’.

The last bulwark of Romanticism?

According to the Hungarian writer György Konrád, unlike the ‘technology-oriented’ people from the West, an average inhabitant of Central Europe is more interested in ‘the novel than in a novel technology, and he perceived his environment in a novelistic manner through and through’²⁶. Under such an approach, our region might be the last bulwark of a romantic (spiritual) perception of the world, as opposed to the consumerist and hedonist way of life of Westerners, who as Kazimierz Krzysztofek observed ‘are less and less capable of metaphysical experience’²⁷. Thus, for both authors Central Europe might offer the West a slightly different model of life and culture, ‘a sense of the metaphysical and a poetry and self-irony arising from a different history’²⁸.

The controversial duality of the spiritual Central Europe and the materialist, technically advanced West proved, also according to many Western intellectuals, not a completely true image of Europe. Our region became obsessed with copying cultural patterns from the West, thus giving up the development of our own distinctive identity. That we are accused of a lack of intellectual innovativeness and cultural counter-proposals might stem from the fact that we have made the program of economic transformation the principal engine of our own development and the focus of all of our efforts. The successful progress or the downturn of the economic transformation has become the main source of our concern and obsession. There is no room in the new, capitalist world of a free market economy for original brave ideas or cultural projects that might offer a vision of reality alternative to that of the Western world.

²⁵ Ibidem., p. 9, *passim*.

²⁶ G. Konrád, *Der Traum von Mitteleuropa*, in: *Aufbruch nach Mitteleuropa...* op. cit., p. 96.

²⁷ *The western people are less and less capable of metaphysical experience*, in: K. Krzysztofek, *Mitteleuropäische Mythen und Wirklichkeiten*. Ed. P. Garlich, K. Glass, B. Serloth. Toruń 1996, p. 77.

²⁸ A. Szczerski, *Wzorce tożsamości...* op.cit., p. 26.

On the contrary, Central European countries (especially the so-called Visegrad Group: Poland, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Slovakia) began to uncritically adopt Western values and social patterns, thereby diminishing their creative input into European culture. The Western myth of a democratic civil society and of the free market has also become our myth²⁹. What is more, our patronising and indifferent or hostile attitude towards Russia, especially in the Polish context, thwarted our chances of becoming an attractive bridge between the West and the East, which might have been our unique and significant, if not altogether lost mission in Europe.

Transl. Marcin Turcki

²⁹ K. Krzysztofek, in: *Mitteleuropäische Mythen...ibidem.*, p. 75.