

# In Memoriam John Neubauer

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On the eve of our Estonian Association of Comparative Literature 11<sup>th</sup> international conference in Tartu, Estonia, I received an e-mail letter from my long-time good colleague and friend John Neubauer, from Amsterdam. His short lines from October 26, 2015, with the title “Farewell”, put me in consternation. With heavy heart, John said, he had to announce his retirement from the academic advisory committee of our journal *Interlitteraria*, because his death was imminent.

Especially as John sent me his letter by e-mail and was himself an interdisciplinary scholar *par excellence*, first educated as a physicist, and then as a literary and cultural scholar, with an amazingly broad knowledge and erudition in sciences, music, psychology, history, his tragic announcement made me once more feel the sad truth summarized in its fullest quintessence by Pedro Calderón de la Barca in the short play *El gran teatro del mundo* (The Great Theatre of the World). Whatever wonderful illusions of future and progress man could produce and imagine on the earth, whatever roles he might take, whatever escapes could he scheme, the end is silence. No human mind, however clever, capable or prophetic, can claim to know if what we see during this short symbolic second of our lives, is reality or just a dream.

Yet despite that the same Spanish 17<sup>th</sup>-century playwright, poet and philosopher made stand forth in his drama masterpiece *La vida es sueño* (Life Is a Dream) a noble leitmotif of “doing good” and following the path of virtue, regardless of what life was. “Even if it is merely a dream, a good and virtuous deed will never be lost,” Calderón claimed.

It can be said of John Neubauer’s deeds in his life /dream. We met in Tartu in 1993, shortly after my country Estonia following the collapse of the Soviet empire had become a free independent state. I had been teaching Western literary history at the University of Tartu — Estonia’s main university — since 1974. After the country’s reestablished independence, in 1992, I was elected to the post of chair

professor of world literature. In parallel, I was in charge of coordinating a program of Spanish studies, for the first time ever introduced in Estonia.

At the time of John's visit to Tartu, he was an accomplished comparatist, an active member of the International Comparative Literature Association, one of those scholars who had substantially contributed to the research of literature's relations with science, language and music. After leaving as a young man his home country Hungary after the 1956 uprising and the following repressions, he settled in the US, where he got his academic degrees and taught German literature at different universities. In 1983 he moved to the Netherlands where he worked as the chair professor of comparative literature at the University of Amsterdam.

By contrast with John's international scope of scholarly activities, our Estonian academic life had been very much restricted in the SU. Our contacts with Western scholarship were scarce. The economic situation of the country at the start of the new independence was extremely meager, our salaries at universities were low. To visit other countries we nearly always needed visas. Lots of efforts had to be made for elementary daily survival, while at the same time there was an urgent need to restructure academic life, to write new manuals for schools and universities, etc.

At our meeting in 1993 John asked us: why could we not found our Estonian association of comparative literature, to become a collective member of the ICLA?

Indeed, we liked and accepted his idea. At the end of the same year we founded our Estonian Association of Comparative Literature. Since its admission in 1994 in the structure of the ICLA it not only started to propel literary research in Estonia, but contributed growingly to the international dimension of our literary life.

Naturally, not everything went so smoothly in the beginning. Our travels abroad were still very much restricted by the economic misery of those times. Thus evoking today my first ever visit to the Netherlands — following John's invitation for guest lectures at his home university of Amsterdam, in 1994 — sounds like a series of grotesque adventures of a picaresque novel. As air travel was too expensive for my budget, I with my wife Margit had the plan to reach the Netherlands by bus via Poland and Germany. The Estonian bus failed to appear in the evening of our scheduled departure from Tartu. The boss of the bus firm apologized and promised us air flight from Tallinn airport, the following morning. Yet nobody in Tallinn knew anything about that special deal. As the result, my wife had to stay at home, while I bought a one-way air ticket to Amsterdam, with the hope, as the bus firm boss had assured, that I could still return from the Netherlands

by their surface transport.

However, while in Amsterdam, I had to obtain Germany's transit visa and also the Netherlands return visa, as my plan included proceeding from Amsterdam to Paris, by Euroline bus, to visit there my sister who was at that time in charge of establishing Estonian embassy in the French capital city. In conclusion, I had to spend a considerable time of my short stay in Amsterdam visiting various embassies and consular offices. Indeed the Germans were kind enough and issued me their transit visa. In turn, the Dutch officials were reluctant to do what I asked. They advised me not to go to Paris. I still did. Luckily nobody checked my passport during that illegal night travel across the lowlands between France and the Netherlands ... I still could not return by bus to Estonia, because the Estonian bus firm meanwhile had gone bankrupt... John was kind and tried to help me as he could, but he could not do much for a post-socialist East-European visitor who clearly did not fit into the system of the Western world.

After I had asked somebody in Estonia to lend me money and finally could take my return air flight, I felt as if I had fled from a "living hell" ... I was happy to be back in my poor and miserable native country.

Gradually we managed to overcome these initial difficulties of the new independence phase of our state. Our country established its institutions and foundations that, however modestly, still provided some relief for cultural and academic activity. In 1996 we founded *Interlitteraria*, an international comparative literature journal. By today, it has become an important platform for European and world literary and cultural research. Also in 1996, we held in Tartu our first comparative literature international conference. Our scholars started to take part in the worldwide activities of the ICLA, while our efforts to contribute to the international field of comparative literary studies were appreciated and supported by a number of leading and merited world scholars whose articles and essays started to appear in *Interlitteraria*, in parallel with contributions of younger literary researchers from a great variety of countries.

John Neubauer belonged in the ICLA and in the comparative research field to the minority of international scholars who dared to undertake major tasks. In my opinion one of his greatest achievements was editing, with Marcel Cornis-Pope, a four-volume *History of the Literary Cultures of East-Central Europe* (2004-2010), to which all active literary and cultural scholars from our part of the world were invited to contribute. More than ever before and after our Estonian literary researchers became involved in the collective ICLA project of writing a new literary history, organized in a novel fashion, with a number of historical nodes as

points of departure for discussing all major East-Central Europe's literary-cultural issues and phenomena.

In his article "Globalizing Literary History" published in this cluster, John Neubauer shared with world comparatists the rich experience acquired by the editors in the long process of organizing and shaping this new experimental literary history. He did it in the background of all existing previous efforts in the mentioned field, as well as envisaged contours for those younger scholars who might undertake similar efforts, not only in the Western part of the world, but also in the East, in times to come.

John was open to new ideas and approaches, but he was far from sticking to certain "schools" or positions, which unfortunately have lead an important section of comparative literary scholarship to follow either formalist or sociological patterns, in oblivion of the primary moral tasks humanities have in the world. He welcomed the formation in China of a new movement of ethically orientated literary research and the foundation of the International Association for Ethical Literary Criticism. Time appeared implacably too short for John to contribute in person to the conferences of this newly founded association.

Yet moral orientation of literary criticism was by no means anything new for John. I guess his last article published in his life was under the title "Victims and Perpetrators: Two Novels on the 1942 Novi Sad Atrocities", printed in *Interlitteraria*'s special issue "Taming World Literature" (Supplement 1, 2015; edited by Liina Lukas and Katre Talviste), presented in Tartu just a few days before the great scholar and kind friend John Neubauer passed away.

Thank you, dear John. We in the Estonian academia of literary scholarship will remember you forever. You indeed did good deeds to us and the world of letters.

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