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Mapping the Liminal Experience of Eastern Europe in Selected American Works, 1965-2002

Martyna Bryla

AUTOR: Martyna Bryla

http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1974-9201

Martyna Bryla

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Supervised by Dr. Rosario Arias Doblas

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Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Departamento de Filología Inglesa,
Francesa y Alemana

Dra. Rosario Arias Doblas
Depto. de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Universidad de Málaga
Campus de Teatinos
29071 Málaga
Tel.00-34- 952131794
Email: rarias@uma.es

Dra. Dª Mª del Rosario Arias Doblas, Profesora Titular de Literatura Inglesa en el Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana

CERTIFICA:

Que Dª Martyna Bryla, Licenciada en Filología Inglesa, ha realizado bajo mi dirección, en el Departamento de Filología Inglesa, Francesa y Alemana, de la Universidad de Málaga, la Tesis Doctoral titulada

"Mapping the Liminal Experience of Eastern Europe in Selected American Works, 1965-2002"

Revisado el presente trabajo estimo que reúne los requisitos establecidos según la legislación vigente. Por lo tanto, **AUTORIZO** la presentación y defensa pública de esta Tesis Doctoral para optar al grado de Doctora en la Universidad de Málaga.

Y para que así conste, lo firmo en Málaga a 12 de mayo de 2015

Rosario Arias

UNIVERSIDAD DE MÁLAGA
Facultad de Filosofía y Letras
Departamento de Filología Inglesa
Francesa y Alemana

Fdo. Rosario Arias Doblas

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Resumen

Las ideas centrales de este trabajo doctoral aparecen reflejadas en el título: mientras "mapping" se refiere a la práctica de trazar mapas imaginativos de personas y países extranjeros a través de la literatura, "the liminal experience of Eastern Europe" indica los encuentros generativos interculturales entre los personajes/escritores norteamericanos y Europa del Este y, así mismo, hace referencia al carácter del objeto de estudio. En este trabajo, "Europa del Este" no es solamente un espacio geográfico referido al mapa del continente, sino un depósito de imágenes y significados; un ejemplo de "cartografía mental", que combina las realidades históricas, políticas y sociales de la región con las percepciones y representaciones que existen sobre ella.

En el presente trabajo doctoral se pretende estudiar las representaciones literarias de Europa del Este en las obras de los escritores norteamericanos, quienes viajaron y retrataron esta región entre los años sesenta del siglo XX y principios del siglo XXI. La base central del trabajo la ocupan tres autores estadounidenses de reconocido prestigio: John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates y Philip Roth. No obstante, el último capítulo propone un análisis conjunto de las perspectivas norteamericanas sobre Europa del Este después de la caída del comunismo, a través de los escritos de Eva Hoffman, Arthur Phillips, John Beckman y Gary Shteyngart.

El hecho de que estas tres grandes voces literarias de América hayan sido el centro del trabajo, ha tenido una reseñable influencia sobre las consecuencias y los resultados que éste proporciona. El propósito no ha sido ofrecer una visión exhaustiva de la representación de Europa del Este bajo el comunismo en la cultura norteamericana, sino, más bien, analizar un fragmento de un cuadro más amplio. Sin embargo, este fragmento se considera como una fuente significativa y fascinante de

conocimiento, además de contar con la escritura excepcional de, posiblemente, algunos de los más grandes escritores estadounidenses de la posguerra.

El enfoque crítico que sustenta este trabajo es el de la *imagología*, que se define como un estudio de los procesos de representación de las naciones extranjeras mediante la literatura y otras artes. Así mismo, para analizar el modo en que Europa del Este está representada en las obras norteamericanas seleccionadas, se recurre al concepto de *liminalidad*. En cuanto la imagología constituye el marco teórico de este trabajo, garantizando el rigor crítico y el método de análisis, la idea de liminalidad permite elucidar la indeterminación y la maleabilidad que forman la base del objeto de estudio -la idea, la imagen y la experiencia de Europa del Este. Recurriendo tanto al concepto original desarrollado por el antropólogo británico Victor Turner, como a las teorías más recientes, el estudio propone interpretar los viajes literarios transatlánticos en términos de una experiencia productiva en la cual Europea del Este se convierte en un espacio liminal lleno de potencialidad; una "zona de contacto" entre culturas y, potencialmente, un lugar de descubrimiento o incluso transformación personal para los personajes y/o autores norteamericanos. Aunque el trabajo se inspira en influyentes estudios como *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994) de Larry Wolff, *Orientalism* (1978) de Edward Said o *Imagining the Balkans* (1997) escrito por Maria Todorova, los objetivos que se proponen son más modestos. El presente trabajo no trata de demostrar que la representación de Europa del Este como un espacio/experiencia liminal se extienda más allá de las obras norteamericanas seleccionadas. Sin embargo, se pretenden analizar las *geografías imaginativas* de Europa del Este que se manifiestan en dichas obras con el objetivo de trazar los patrones y afinidades que existen entre ellas. Al mismo tiempo, se demuestra que estas representaciones reflejan las inquietudes de los

autores, así como, los intereses y preocupaciones políticas y sociales propias del periodo de la Guerra Fría. Aunque el término "liminal" se ha utilizado en la literatura crítica para el estudio de la Europa del Este de posguerra (Szakolczai) y también para referirse a su conceptualización e imagen en Occidente (Forrester, Zaborowska y Gapova, Borcila), el presente estudio es innovador en lo referente al marco teórico, combinando la investigación de las manifestaciones e implicaciones de la idea de liminalidad con el método crítico estipulado por la imagología, para así trazar las percepciones norteamericanas del área a través de la literatura. En este sentido, este trabajo, a través de su enfoque crítico y de los resultados obtenidos, espera ser una contribución valiosa a la literatura crítica que estudia la dinámica entre el Este y el Oeste desde la perspectiva de la imagología. Además, la aplicación de la liminalidad al análisis de la idea, la imagen y la experiencia de Europa del Este pretende expandir productivamente el potencial crítico del concepto sin, a la vez, perder sus características principales. El presente trabajo también puede ser relevante en el ámbito de los estudios post-socialistas que, a pesar de estar centrados en la época presente, siguen "mirando atrás" hacia la representación y la memoria cultural relacionada con este espacio.

El trabajo se divide en seis capítulos, el último de ellos constituyendo una coda a la discusión previa. Tal como la sección musical así denominada, la coda reúne diferentes líneas y argumentos explorados en los capítulos anteriores desde la perspectiva crítica posterior a 1989. Los dos primeros capítulos conjuntamente forman el marco crítico del trabajo. Por lo tanto, en "Liminality: State of the Art" se aborda el concepto de liminalidad, trazando la andadura que éste ha realizado desde su origen -la antropología- a través de aquellas disciplinas y/o áreas de estudio donde el concepto ha sido empleado con el fin de analizar las situaciones, personas, lugares y fenómenos

que eluden la clasificación y, por tanto, requieren un abordaje más matizado, orientado a la ambigüedad, la diversidad y la transición. La autora considera que el potencial crítico del concepto de liminalidad se puede apreciar de forma más amplia a través de los ejemplos. Por lo tanto, el primer capítulo ofrece una relativamente amplia, aunque a la vez rigurosa, selección de manifestaciones y aplicaciones del concepto para iluminar diferentes aspectos de los "performance studies", la cultura, la literatura, el espacio y los viajes e incluso los grandes fenómenos socio-históricos. A la vez, estos ejemplos arrojan luz y anticipan la aplicación del concepto a la temática de este estudio. La primera sección aborda la liminalidad en el contexto de los ritos de pasaje a través de la obra del antropólogo francés Arnold van Gennep, el autor del concepto. Posteriormente, se demuestra cómo las ideas de van Gennep fueron elaboradas y re-configuradas por el antropólogo cultural británico Victor Turner, con el objetivo de conceptualizar una fisura temporal en la estructura donde lo familiar deja de ser cierto y lo normativo se trastoca, resultando en una condición de desarrollo y de creatividad potencial en las vidas de los individuos, las sociedades y las culturas (St John 5). En base a varios escritos de Turner que tratan las manifestaciones de la idea de liminalidad, tanto en las tribus cómo en las sociedades modernas, la autora aborda los cambios que el concepto experimentó ya en el trabajo del propio Turner (por ejemplo, a través de la distinción entre "liminal" y "liminoid") anticipando sus futuras aplicaciones en otros campos. Dicho esto, se analizan los "performance studies" como un campo imbuido del espíritu de la liminalidad, con el fin de indicar cómo las reconfiguraciones del concepto puedan afectar a su potencial crítico. La autora también explica por qué en su propia aplicación se centra en lo liminal y sus implicaciones antes que en los resultados. Por consiguiente, se reconoce la importancia de la idea de liminalidad en los estudios culturales, centrándose en las

obras de los críticos como Homi Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, o Mary Louise Pratt cuyas perspectivas sobre la cultura problematizan polarizaciones y dicotomías, favoreciendo en cambio la hibridez e intersticialidad. Particularmente, las interpretaciones literarias que Bhabha propone anticipan el abordaje de la literatura como un lugar donde la liminalidad funciona a varios niveles y en diversas configuraciones. En consecuencia, el apartado 1.3. revisa una serie de formas en las que lo liminal puede impregnar e incluso definir una obra literaria. La discusión está en gran medida en deuda con *Studies in Liminality and Literature*, una serie de publicaciones bajo la dirección general de Manuel Aguirre e Isabel Soto, que ofrece una visión de amplio alcance de los usos y las implicaciones de la liminalidad en la crítica literaria y más allá. Escogiendo entre muchas aplicaciones posibles de la liminalidad para estudiar los textos literarios, esta sección pretende mostrar cómo el concepto se emplea para analizar los géneros, los símbolos, el lenguaje y los personajes que se resisten a categorías bien definidas y se encuentran en cambio en las grietas entre varias tradiciones, modos de expresión y patrones de comportamiento.

Teniendo en cuenta el carácter de los encuentros literarios explorados en esta tesis, la siguiente sección aborda los viajes y el espacio. Particularmente el viaje aéreo se discute como un periodo liminal lleno de potencialidad y expectación. De la misma manera, el espacio aeroportuario emerge como una zona de transición, una puerta de entrada a la extraordinaria experiencia del viaje. Aunque el tiempo y el espacio transitorio son típicamente asociados con el juego, la transgresión y la liberación, también pueden generar miedo, peligro, e incluso la maximización de la estructura. Este carácter contradictorio de las experiencias liminales, ya reconocido por Victor Turner, apunta a la lectura liminal de Europa del Este. Siguiendo la proposición de Bjørn Thomassen de que los espacios liminales pueden ser lugares y territorios reales

o pueden ser imaginados o soñados ("Revisiting" 21), se aborda Europa del Este como una fusión de lo real y lo imaginario; un terreno que existe en más de una dimensión, oscilando entre varias narraciones y representaciones.

La penúltima sección de este capítulo, titulado "Liminal Modernity" explora el potencial del concepto para captar la esencia de las transformaciones y las condiciones socio-históricas. La discusión se basa particularmente en el trabajo de un académico húngaro con un bagaje verdaderamente intercultural, de hecho liminal. Szakolczai asegura que experimentar el telón de acero desde el otro lado le permitió ganar una serie de experiencias, las cuales le diferenciaron de muchos teóricos sociales de Europa Occidental y de Norteamérica. Sin lugar a dudas, estos conocimientos interculturales impulsaron el interés de Szakolczai por la liminalidad, entendiéndola como una herramienta de ordenamiento para el análisis de la modernidad. Teniendo en cuenta el tema de esta disertación, esta sección se centra sobre todo en el concepto de *liminalidad permanente*, que Szakolczai aplica a la condición de Europa del Este bajo el comunismo. En una perspectiva más amplia, su empleo de la noción de liminalidad demuestra cómo éste se está reconfigurando en el conocimiento contemporáneo, mientras al mismo tiempo mantiene fuertes vínculos con la trama original de referencia, que es también uno de los retos de este trabajo.

El concepto de liminalidad está incrustado en la discusión de la idea y la imagen de Europa del Este que se explora en el capítulo 2. El marco de referencia es la imagología cuyas preocupaciones y métodos están descritas en las secciones 2.1 y 2.2. Esta especialidad de la literatura comparada se centra en la construcción cultural de las representaciones nacionales y el papel que las nociones preconcebidas de alteridad juegan en la aproximación a las personas y lugares extranjeros. Por consiguiente, se comienza ofreciendo una breve introducción a la tradición de imaginar mismidad y

alteridad, que precede el estudio formal de la imagología por muchos siglos. Después de haber rastreado los orígenes de la especialidad, se procede a describir el método de estudio y el vocabulario que se aplica más adelante para analizar las representaciones norteamericanas de la alteridad de Europa del Este en la literatura. Debido al hecho de que el objeto de estudio de esta tesis abarca varias naciones, constituyendo una amplia rúbrica conceptual semejante al Oriente de Edward Said, se emplea su idea de *geografías imaginativas* que bien resume la práctica de trazar mapas mentales de los pueblos y paisajes, los cuales "articulan los deseos, las fantasías y los miedos de sus autores y también las relaciones de poder entre ellos y sus 'otros'" ("Imaginative" 370, traducción propia). Como se señala en el capítulo 1, Europa del Este es una construcción multifacética que se resiste a la categorización rígida y conlleva una carga de significados. Por lo tanto, la sección 2.3. pretende abordarla como un almacén de proyectos políticos y percepciones culturales. Tomando el ejemplo del influyente estudio de Larry Wolff, se desarrolla dicho argumento indicando algunas de las designaciones, narrativas y representaciones que este espacio comprende. Se sostiene que Europa del Este es una construcción altamente maleable cuya composición geográfica refleja los mapas mentales, tanto individuales como colectivos. En este sentido, se discuten brevemente las concepciones de *Europa Central* y *Mitteleuropa* -que combinan la *Realpolitik* con los mapeos culturales. Aunque la idea de Europa del Este es mucho más antigua que la Guerra Fría, este trabajo presta más interés a las percepciones y proyectos que alimentaron la Europa del Este de la segunda mitad del siglo XX. Para este propósito, se esboza el proceso de su construcción geopolítica, destacando la interdependencia entre las divisiones políticas y las fronteras mentales. Luego, a la espera de analizar las representaciones americanas de la zona, se examina la naturaleza de los contactos culturales entre

Occidente y Europa del Este. Así, la sección 2.5. plantea varias preguntas con respecto a los intereses occidentales en Europa del Este en el período de la Guerra Fría: ¿qué tipo de viajeros visitaron la región? ¿Por qué viajaban allí y que percepciones tuvieron de ella? La propuesta es que la compleja relación entre la cultura y la política que se desarrolló en Europa del Este bajo el comunismo forma el eje del interés intelectual de Occidente y su representación literaria de la zona en esta época. Destacando la importancia de los escritores censurados en la formación de las hetero-imágenes americanas de la zona, se reconsidera la idea de Europa Central, propugnada por autores emigrados como Milan Kundera y Czesław Miłosz, como un contrapeso intelectual a la homogeneidad impuesta a Europa del Este. Aunque no se sugiere que los escritores norteamericanos analizados en esta tesis hagan referencia consciente a esta idea en sus escritos, su representación de Europa del Este combina, por un lado, la uniformidad impuesta por el estado comunista y, por otro, la riqueza cultural de la región; lo que resulta en una representación en la que "Europa del Este" compite con "Europa Central", por así decirlo.

Por último, se ofrece un breve bosquejo de las representaciones anteriores de los países que componen Europa del Este en la literatura norteamericana, de acuerdo con la premisa principal de la imagología que sostiene que la primera tarea consiste en establecer el intertexto de dicha representación nacional para descubrir como la imagen bajo investigación se acopla con la tradición existente (Leerssen, "Imagology" 28). Aunque este análisis no es de ninguna manera exhaustivo, espera poder ofrecer una visión de las geografías imaginativas estadounidenses sobre Polonia, Checoslovaquia, Hungría, Bulgaria, Rumanía, y, en menor medida, Alemania (del este) y Rusia, centrándose en cómo los escritores estadounidenses percibían estos países frente al resto de Europa y en relación con su tierra natal. En la discusión, se

presta particular atención a los principales acontecimientos históricos que determinaron las relaciones internacionales y, por lo tanto, las percepciones mutuas. Por razones obvias, la Segunda Guerra Mundial y el orden político posterior representan un punto de inflexión en la historia de la representación de Europa Oriental en la literatura norteamericana y, por lo tanto, ocupan un lugar importante en la discusión.

La imagología enmarca el estudio de las representaciones literarias norteamericanas de Europa del Este, que abarca tres capítulos dedicados a John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates y Philip Roth, respectivamente. Como se mencionó anteriormente, Updike, Oates, y Roth viajaron a Europa del Este bajo el comunismo, pero sus visitas tuvieron un carácter diferente. Updike y Oates fueron allí bajo los auspicios de la United States Information Agency (USIA) como embajadores oficiales de la cultura norteamericana. Los escritores visitaron varios países del Bloque del Este y sus viajes imaginativos reflejan en gran medida sus itinerarios oficiales. En cuanto a Roth, el Este de Europa se materializa en la ciudad de Praga. Cabe destacar que el compromiso de Roth con Europa del Este tenía un carácter privado que se distingue de los viajes oficiales realizados por Updike y Oates.

Con el fin de contextualizar las imágenes del Este de Europa dentro de un marco más completo de la obra de los escritores, cada análisis está precedido por una discusión crítica con elementos biográficos, centrada en la relación entre las preocupaciones temáticas del autor y su "domestic identity" (Leerssen, "Imagology" 27). A continuación, se estudia cómo Europa del Este está representada por los autores y en qué medida estas imágenes reflejan las representaciones culturales existentes de los países que integran la zona. A pesar de que cada escritor se analiza por separado, se intenta ofrecer una lectura intertextual de las visiones de Europa del Este

proporcionadas por cada uno de los autores, para averiguar si se correlacionan de alguna manera significativa. Sin embargo, no se sugiere la posibilidad de un diálogo intertextual entre Updike, Oates, y Roth, sino que más bien se busca desvelar elementos comunes en sus representaciones de la alteridad de Europa del Este, y así, explorar lo que estas imágenes nos comunican acerca de la América de la época. Aunque cada experiencia de Europa del Este es distinta, juntas forman un mosaico de impresiones entrelazadas, observaciones y preocupaciones. Siendo un hilo común, la liminalidad, en diferentes formas, atraviesa estos mapas imaginativas, complicando las oposiciones binarias entre Este y Oeste y problematizando las nociones preconcebidas que acompañan estas divisiones arbitrarias. Por otra parte, el sentido de potencialidad impulsa los viajes interculturales de los personajes, mientras que las capitales de Europa del Este se convierten en sitios de reflexión personal, de conflicto interno y, a veces, incluso la transformación física y mental.

John Updike abre la discusión de las visiones literarias americanas del mundo detrás del telón de acero. En el capítulo 3, se estudian cuatro relatos en los que el protagonista de Updike, el escritor judío-americano Henry Bech viaja a Rusia, Rumania, Bulgaria y Checoslovaquia para el Departamento de Estado dentro del Programa de Intercambio Cultural entre Estados Unidos y la URSS. Updike fue el primero de los tres autores explorados en este trabajo que viajó a Europa del Este y luego convirtió su experiencia en ficción. Por lo tanto, sus relatos ofrecen información valiosa sobre los contactos culturales relativamente tempranos en la historia de la Guerra Fría. Por otra parte, dado que dos décadas separan el primer ("The Bulgarian Poetess" de 1965) y el último relato ("Bech in Czech" de 1985), es posible apreciar cómo las percepciones de Henry Bech de alteridad se modifican con el tiempo.

El capítulo 4 abarca las representaciones de Europa del Este en los relatos cortos de Joyce Carol Oates. El análisis se centra en cinco relatos inspirados por los viajes de la autora y publicados como parte de una colección titulada *Last Days: Stories* (1984). El mapa imaginativo de Oates comprende Berlin ("Ich Bin Ein Berliner" junto a "Our Wall"), Varsovia ("My Warszawa: 1980") y Budapest ("Old Budapest"). Además, en "Détente" la autora ofrece una interesante interpretación del carácter ruso, que ha sido incluida en la discusión, dada su importancia imagológica.

El capítulo 5 examina la vinculación de Philip Roth con Praga a través del análisis exhaustivo de dos obras: *The Professor of Desire* (1977) and *The Prague Orgy* (1985). Ya en la introducción del autor, se anticipa el ávido interés de Roth por la literatura europea, subrayando a Roth como un novelista cuya ficción a menudo ha llegado más allá del Atlántico, estableciendo diálogos intertextuales con otros autores y literaturas. Tal como se indicó anteriormente, este capítulo se diferencia de los otros dos. No sólo viajó Roth a Europa del Este por su propia iniciativa, sino también su compromiso con Praga fue bastante intenso y duradero. En consecuencia, el análisis de la imagen y el significado de Praga en la ficción de Roth también hace referencia a la experiencia personal del autor; su fascinación por Franz Kafka, su amistad con autores disidentes, así como, sus reflexiones sobre la relación entre arte y política inspirados por Praga.

El sexto y último capítulo, que se denomina "coda", se divide en dos partes. En la primera, se discuten nuevas perspectivas críticas y líneas de investigación en el estudio de Europa del Este tras la caída del comunismo. Se presta especial atención a cómo las ideas, los hallazgos y el vocabulario crítico de los estudios poscoloniales pueden ampliar de forma productiva la comprensión crítica de las culturas que todavía se están reconciliando con los legados sociopolíticos de los sistemas comunistas.

Tradicionalmente, la coda se extiende sobre o re-elabora los motivos escuchados previamente. En una línea similar, se vuelve a los temas que se discutieron en el capítulo 2. En particular, se destacan los mapas mentales internos y externos relacionados con Europa del Este desde la perspectiva posterior a 1989, con el argumento de que estos siguen siendo válidos, a pesar de que, las divisiones políticas que los sostenían ya no están presentes. En este sentido, se sitúa el propio proyecto de investigación dentro del panorama de los estudios post-socialistas, afirmando la importancia del concepto de liminalidad y de la imagología en el proceso de construcción de un vocabulario crítico que, aunque consciente de los patrones de representación originados en la época de la Guerra Fría, no se basa en ellos sino impulsa nuevas formas de pensar (Freedman 208). En la segunda parte del capítulo, se lleva a cabo un análisis imagológico conjunto de cuatro obras escritas después de 1989. Se trata de *Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe* (1993) de Eva Hoffman, *Prague* (2002) de Arthur Phillips, *The Winter Zoo* (2002) de John Beckman, and *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002) escrita por Gary Shteyngart. Excepto Hoffman, los otros títulos son obras de debut. Al igual que Updike, Oates y Roth, todos los autores viajaron a Europa del Este y sus obras se inspiraron en estos viajes transatlánticos. Por un lado, los encuentros interculturales que estos libros presentan se asemejan a los representados en las obras anteriores en que comparten el elemento liminal del viaje y están impregnadas de un sentido de transitoriedad. La mayoría de los expatriados estadounidenses retratados por Phillips, Beckman y Shteyngart son meros visitantes cuyas estancias en Europa del Este siempre terminan con un viaje de vuelta a casa. Por otro lado, también proporcionan conocimientos sobre nuevas dinámicas políticas, sociales y económicas; y, en particular, introducen a un nuevo tipo de explorador americano en Europa del Este.

Referente a lo primero, se puede apreciar que la obra de Eva Hoffman retrata Europa del Este en el momento de cruzar el umbral entre la "vieja" y la "nueva" realidad. En el contexto de esta tesis, *Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe* sirve de puente entre la última representación debatida en este trabajo, es decir *The Prague Orgy* de Roth, y las nuevas voces literarias que retrataron la zona después de la caída del comunismo. Aunque todavía impulsados por "antiguos" patrones culturales, estas nuevas geografías imaginativas también reflejan nuevos mapas mentales fomentados por los intereses y las inquietudes de los viajeros. Dicho esto, se sostiene que la liminalidad es una herramienta válida para el análisis de la experiencia americana de Europa del Este, también posteriormente a 1989.

Por más que se ha tratado de reconstruir las hetero-imágenes literarias de la Europa del Este bajo el comunismo, este proyecto también ha permitido dar a conocer las dinámicas complejas entre el *self* y la alteridad que estas obras transmiten. En este sentido, cada experiencia analizada en este trabajo, referida a Europa del Este, es distinta y se alimenta de los perfiles, las identidades y los intereses tanto de los personajes como de sus creadores. Al mismo tiempo, sin embargo, cabe destacar que estas visiones comparten muchos puntos en común. Los viajes transatlánticos y transculturales encuadran y determinan estos encuentros, imbuyéndoles de potencialidad y expectación. Sin embargo, su condición liminal, reforzada por la situación privilegiada de los personajes estadounidenses como visitantes temporales de "un mundo mejor", contrasta con las inquietantes realidades sociopolíticas y la memoria oscura del pasado de la región. Entre otros, esta dualidad se puede percibir en "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" de Oates, en el que el narrador innominado gradualmente pierde la compostura bajo la influencia misteriosa del Muro de Berlín, o en "Bech in Rumania" de Updike, donde el tono guasón e irónico del escritor Henry Bech oculta

su temor al antisemitismo rumano. Por otra parte, los intercambios/misiones de "buena voluntad" revelan diferencias culturales que, a su vez, reflejan las redes globales de poder y los mapas geopolíticos de dominación: la figura trágica del disidente checo Profesor Soska proporciona un contrapunto para el profesor estadounidense David Kepesh en *The Professor of Desire*, mientras que en "Rich in Russia" la rivalidad soviético-estadounidense subyace al comportamiento estereotípicamente consumista de Henry Bech en Moscú. En este sentido, Europa del Este emerge como un espejo en el que Occidente considera su poderosa silueta refractada a través de la disfuncionalidad del mundo comunista. Por otro lado, también funciona como un "mundo más allá del espejo", donde se promulgan nuevos escenarios; se cruzan límites y se realizan (auto) descubrimientos. Baste recordar la confrontación dolorosa de Judith Horne con su patrimonio judío en Varsovia, o a Nathan Zuckerman dándose cuenta de que Praga es la ciudad judía imaginaria de su infancia, para ver que la identidad étnica y la herencia cultural a menudo conducen estas experiencias formativas, funcionando como un nexo entre los personajes americanos y Europa del Este, pero también problematizando estos encuentros transculturales; tal como sucede con Henry Bech cuyo temor subliminal al Holocausto convierte Praga en un sitio de terror casi físico.

En cuanto a la posición de la Unión Soviética en estos mapas imaginativos, se ha demostrado que se caracteriza por una ambivalencia fascinante. En particular, John Updike invistió la figura de Henry Bech con un bagaje emocional paradójico, combinando unos sentimientos afectuosos hacia la atemporal "Madre Rusia", con una hostilidad hacia la Unión Soviética como el mayor adversario en la Guerra Fría. En una línea similar, la protagonista de "Détente" de Oates proyecta sus nociones preconcebidas de la alteridad de Rusia sobre el escritor soviético, moldeándole en un

objeto de deseo exotizado; una figura rebelde perturbada y semejante a los personajes de Dostoievski. A la luz del capítulo 2, estos mapas mentales reflejan las relaciones políticas entre los dos países, así como, las representaciones culturales anteriores creadas por los medios de comunicación y la literatura. Así pues, Rusia/Unión Soviética está siempre presente en las obras analizadas, ya sea de forma explícita como el contraparte/adversario de Estados Unidos o también la sombra ominosa que se cierne sobre las "naciones cautivas" de Europa del Este.

Sin embargo, mientras que los escritos analizados beben del rico repertorio de representaciones culturales existentes, este análisis también arroja luz sobre el hecho de que estas narrativas reflejan los intereses e inquietudes de sus autores. En otras palabras, las reelaboraciones imaginativas de las visitas reales a Europa del Este combinan, tanto el material que estos viajes proporcionaron, como los temas y las preguntas propias de los respectivos autores. Por consiguiente, Henry Bech emerge como un contrapeso al más famoso protagonista de Updike, Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, siendo a la vez un vehículo para explorar escenarios alternativos: Bech es la respuesta de Updike a la cuestión de lo que significa ser un novelista judío-americano, mientras que sus hazañas en el Este de Europa revelan las inseguridades que conlleva ser un escritor (sobre todo cuando Bech se compara con los autores disidentes de Praga). Al mismo tiempo, su misión diplomática para el Departamento del Estado complementa las tribulaciones domésticas de Rabbit durante la Guerra Fría, mostrando la otra cara del conflicto. A nivel personal, la propia estancia de Updike en la Unión Soviética y en Europa del Este consolidó su postura pro-estadounidense y su actitud hacia la literatura con orientación explícitamente política.

Así mismo, es factible apreciar cómo la sensibilidad y la estética creativa de Joyce Carol Oates convierten a Europa del Este en un lugar donde los instintos

subconscientes de sus personajes saltan a la palestra y los conflictos internos se desarrollan y exacerban. Los protagonistas de "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" y "My Warszawa: 1980" no son impulsados por la curiosidad voyerista en su exploración de Berlín y Varsovia, sino que se vencen a su ambiente opresivo que, poco a poco, se impone en sus psiques. En estos relatos, lo personal y lo político se unen para formar un perturbador estado liminal que el crítico Homi Bhabha llama "the unhomely" donde el microcosmos privado se fractura bajo el peso de la historia ("The World" 141). Como observa Greg Johnson este enfoque dualista no es una estrategia aislada, sino el sello distintivo de la ficción de Oates (*Understanding* 180).

El viaje transatlántico como forma de auto-reflexión ha sido explorado posiblemente de forma más profunda en el capítulo dedicado a Philip Roth, en el cual, se sostiene que la experiencia de la *Otra Europa* fue un punto decisivo en la carrera de Roth por un variado número de razones. Desde el inicio, Praga resonó en la sensibilidad artística de Roth, pero también le llevó hacia nuevas direcciones creativas. Como epílogo a *Zuckerman Bound* (1985), *The Prague Orgy* es -como Mark Shechner observó- un colofón perfecto para la trilogía. Aunque esta novela corta es en sí valiosa, no sólo como "un obsceno, homenaje elegiaco a la cultura perdida" (Brauner 43, traducción propia), sino también como un testimonio singular del poder de la literatura, sin importar de dónde proviene. A la vez, y especialmente en conjunto con *The Professor of Desire* y las reflexiones de Roth sobre la situación de los escritores disidentes, la novela habla sobre el negocio de ser un escritor, evocando cuestiones que pueden resultar relevantes incluso hoy en día: ¿qué significa ser escritor? ¿Implica responsabilidad social? ¿Qué tiene que ver la política con ello? Roth no es moralista y sus propias respuestas reflejan su ser independiente e inconformista, pero todas las señales indican que su experiencia de Praga fue fundamental para llegar a ellas.

Mientras que la mayor parte de esta tesis tiene que ver con la representación de Europa del Este en la literatura norteamericana en la época de la Guerra Fría, en la coda se ha tratado de averiguar cómo las revoluciones de 1989 influyeron en las percepciones literarias norteamericanas de la zona, así como, estudiar algunas tendencias académicas actuales sobre el acercamiento a la Europa del Este post-comunista. A pesar de que en 2014 Europa celebró veinticinco años desde la caída del comunismo, parece ser que las categorías conceptuales de Este y Oeste están aún con vida, no solamente en el lenguaje académico, sino también en las etiquetas mentales utilizadas para generalizar sobre los distintos grados de desarrollo socioeconómico y para evocar el pasado comunista de Europa del Este. En este sentido, varios autores reconocen que uno de los desafíos de los académicos se encuentra en la construcción de un vocabulario crítico significativo capaz de expresar "lo nuevo" sin depender demasiado de "lo viejo", o, alternativamente, relegarlo a los recovecos de la historia. Para este propósito, la condición post-comunista de Europa del Este a menudo se explora e interroga utilizando conceptos e instrumentos derivados de los estudios poscoloniales.

Las tendencias y formas de abordar el complejo panorama de Europa del Este, que todavía se enfrenta con legados comunistas en los diferentes niveles actuales de conciencia social, política y cultural, tienen implicaciones directas para esta investigación. En la segunda sección de la coda, se rastrea el cambio en la percepción que acompañó a las transiciones, delineando los perfiles de los nuevos exploradores americanos de la región, junto con sus nuevas agendas. Mientras que la narrativa de Eva Hoffman, aunque no totalmente libre de un pensamiento cliché, constituye un intento de escuchar, explorar y comprender las múltiples voces de Europa del Este en el umbral histórico entre el pasado y el presente, las novelas de Phillips, Beckman y

Shteyngart retratan personajes que viajan allí para cumplir sus ambiciones personales o huir de la carga de sí mismos. En esto son, tal vez, no muy diferentes de personajes como Henry Bech o Nathan Zuckerman, pero sus experiencias carecen de la intensidad y viveza presente en las obras escritas por Updike, Oates y Roth. Estos jóvenes viajeros estadounidenses no han llegado a las capitales de Europa del Este para explorar sus culturas, sino para empaparse de lo que piensan que es un "ambiente cultural" mítico de lugares como Praga o Budapest. No ha sido la intención de este trabajo comparar estas novelas en términos de calidad literaria o importancia con las obras de Updike, Oates y Roth. En cambio, se ha intentado trazar un continuo imagológico de representaciones americanas de Europa del Este, señalando las diferencias en las percepciones y formas de experimentar la zona, que son pertinentes al carácter de los viajeros, la naturaleza de sus viajes y el momento histórico en el que estos tuvieron lugar. Una vez más, la liminalidad resultó ser una categoría funcional útil para analizar la maleabilidad de Europa del Este en manos de los occidentales, revelando al mismo tiempo el nuevo tipo de acercamiento, legitimado por la transición. En este sentido, el Este emerge como la "última frontera" a la espera de ser conquistado financieramente, o un subalterno socioeconómico que debe ser tutelado por el experimentado y superior Occidente. Los trabajos anteriormente mencionados fueron publicados en 2002, pero retratan los principios de los años 90. Andrew Baruch Wachtel observó que, tras la caída del comunismo, la literatura de Europa del Este perdió su estatus de fenómeno sociocultural y de ahí su atractivo para el Oeste (6). Por lo tanto, el interés cultural, que, en gran medida, alimentaba los viajes literarios explorados en este trabajo pertenece a una época que terminó para siempre. Así mismo, una de las preguntas que este trabajo abre tiene que ver con la imagen occidental actual de Europa del Este y lo que hay detrás de ella. Esto a su vez requiere

desempaquetar el adjetivo "occidental". ¿Es posible hablar de la visión exclusivamente americana de la actual Europa del Este como un conjunto de países con una experiencia compartida bajo el comunismo, pero con muy diferentes caminos de desarrollo? Si es así, ¿hay suficiente material literario significativo o, tal vez, la lente conceptual debe adaptarse para tener en cuenta a un amplio observador "occidental" que incluye, por ejemplo, al Reino Unido? Por último, ¿los mapas mentales explorados todavía se reflejarían en un estudio de este tipo?

Para concluir, si bien esta tesis se sostiene por sí misma como una investigación sobre la naturaleza de la idea, la imagen y la experiencia de Europa del Este representada en unas obras estadounidenses seleccionadas, también es, como cualquier estudio imagológico, una suerte de "trabajo en progreso" que evoca nuevas preguntas aunque siempre mira atrás hacia las que ya han sido respondidas.

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For my parents, Anna and Jerzy Bryła

And in memory of my grandparents,

Stefania and Bolesław Kolbusz

Aniela and Jan Bryła

The American sojourner

in East Europe:

where we are "not ourselves."

Cultural ambassadors,

emissaries of art,

sincerity….

Our heads ring with too many bells

extolling too much history.

Gamely persisting in handshakes,

smiling through translators,

staring at tiny withered apples

heaped in sidewalk bins—

a feast! a feast!—

for the imagination.

—Joyce Carol Oates, "Miniatures: East Europe"

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Introduction

In my wallet I carry a commemorative coin. On the reverse there is Poland's national emblem—the crowned eagle. On the obverse a raised hand is shaped into the sign of victory. The caption above says "25 lat wolności"—twenty-five years of freedom.

The writing of this dissertation coincided with a major jubilee in Europe. In 2014 former communist states of Eastern Europe commemorated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the regime.[1] On November 9th 2014 thousands of people gathered in Berlin to celebrate the collapse of the Wall—the most spectacular embodiment of the boundary between East and West. Among them was also Lech Wałęsa, the man who, in President Obama's words "jumped that shipyard wall to lead a strike that became a movement."[2] The hand on my coin is the hand of Wałęsa and all those who fought for freedom together—it is the sign of *Solidarity* in struggle for a different, undivided Europe. While the eagle marks the coin's provenance, the hand and the caption evoke a common chapter in Poland's and Eastern Europe's history. In this sense, this coin may be said to symbolize some of the central ideas of this dissertation. On the one hand, it embodies the idea of *liminality*, expressed here by Poland's simultaneous autonomy and inclusion within Eastern Europe. On the other, the victory sign and the inscription summon a number of images and meanings, such as the above-

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[1] For the sake of consistency and clarity, in this dissertation I do not differentiate between "socialism" and "communism," even though many scholars of the region prefer to refer to the former Warsaw Pact countries as "socialist." The term "socialist" was also used by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels to denote the transitory state between capitalism and communism (Roberts 352). While the ruling parties referred to themselves as "communist," "actually existing socialism" denoted the political system, which may explain the term "post-socialist studies." Conversely, the adjective "communist" was preferred in the U.S. and Western Europe in reference to the Soviet sphere of influence (Erjavec11). The various meanings and ideological implications which these terms entail are discussed, for instance, by Andrew Roberts in "The State of Socialism: A Note on Terminology" (2004).

[2] This is a fragment of President Obama's speech at the 25th Anniversary of Freedom Day in Warsaw, Poland. Full text is available at https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/06/04/remarks-president-obama-25th-anniversary-freedom-day-warsaw-poland.

mentioned Solidarity, the Iron Curtain, or East and West, which together make up the *imagological* tissue of Eastern Europe.

As hinted above, the term "Eastern Europe" as used in this dissertation is charged with significance. If I were to denote the geographical location of the countries whose literary images are discussed here, then East-Central Europe might seem like the right choice. Then, however, it would not work for Bulgaria and Romania, not to mention Russia, which straddles two continents. Bearing in mind Edward Said's words that "all geographical designations are an odd combination of the empirical and the imaginative" (331), I speak of Eastern Europe not just as a space on the map, but as a repository of meanings built out of fact and fantasy: specific historical, political and cultural realities interlaced with subjective worldviews, preconceptions and mental images. In the same vein, I use the term "West," which in this dissertation is synonymous with the United States of America, and, to a lesser extent "Western Europe," and connotes a number of *auto-* and *hetero-images* which vary depending on who employs them, where, and to what purpose. In this sense, the Eastern Europe of this dissertation is an instance of mental mapping par excellence. By selecting certain countries over others, the American authors charted the contours of their Eastern Europe(s), filling them with meanings which, as I seek to show, fed upon the themes and interests driving their fiction as much as on the places they visited and the people they met. These imaginative geographies are symbolically represented on the cover of my dissertation. Designed by Polish graphic artist, Joanna Topolska-Uliasz, this imaginary landscape of Eastern Europe is sufficiently ample to embrace the emblematic Charles Bridge in Prague, the onion domes of Moscow, the Royal Castle from Warsaw's Old Town, and the lofty towers and spires of the Budapest Parliament. The scenic skyline is circumscribed by the wall: the symbol of the Iron Curtain and the

tangible boundary separating it from "the West," betoken here by the American flag which overlaps slightly with the wall, suggesting transatlantic cultural contacts which this work explores.

Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to study literary representations of Eastern Europe in the works of celebrated and less-known American authors who visited and narrated the region between the 1960s and early 2000s. The main critical body focuses on Eastern Europe before 1989 and encompasses three major voices of American literature: John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, and Philip Roth. However, in the last chapter I also explore American perceptions of the area in the aftermath of the collapse of communism through the works written by Eva Hoffman, Arthur Phillips, John Beckman, and Gary Shteyngart. The dissertation falls within *imagology*, which studies the processes of representing foreign nations through literature. To examine the way in which Eastern Europe is imagined in selected American works, I employ the concept of liminality. If imagology is the theoretical framework assuring critical rigor and method of analysis, then liminality helps me to elucidate the indeterminacy and malleability which lies at the heart of the object of study—the idea, image and experience of Eastern Europe. Drawing on the classic understanding of liminality developed by Victor Turner, as well as more recent takes on the concept, particularly in cultural and literary criticism and space and mobility studies, I propose to interpret these transatlantic literary journeys in terms of generative experience, where Eastern Europe is mapped as a liminal space of possibility; a contact zone between cultures and, potentially, the locus of self-discovery and individual transformation.

The departure point for my work has been Philip Roth's fiction on Prague under communism, *The Professor of Desire* (1977) and *The Prague Orgy* (1985), which encouraged me to pursue representations of Eastern European cities in the works of

other American authors. This in turn led me to question the very designation "Eastern Europe," and chapter 2 is the outcome of my inquiries into the meanings that the term conceals. Although the thesis has been inspired by such seminal works about the "invention of tradition" as Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994), Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), or Maria Todorova's *Imagining the Balkans* (1997), its objectives are more modest. I do not attempt to prove that my reading of American representations of Eastern Europe in terms of liminal experience/space may be projected beyond the realm of literature. Notwithstanding, I seek to trace American *imaginative geographies* of Eastern Europe, as manifested in selected works, with the aim of elucidating certain common patterns and affinities. At the same time I wish to show how these representations reflect "inner geographies" of the American authors; their individual agendas but also broader national concerns of the time. Although the term "liminal" has been employed in literature in relation to the condition of post-war Eastern Europe (Szakolczai) and its conceptualization, and representation in the Western imaginary (Forrester, Zaborowska, and Gapova, Borcila), to the best of my knowledge there is no study that combines an in-depth inquiry into the manifestations and implications of liminality with the method of analysis stipulated by imagology to trace American perceptions of the area through literature. In this connection, I hope that through its innovative approach and findings this dissertation will contribute to the scholarly literature concerned with East-West dynamics, Eastern Europe, and literary imagology. Furthermore, my application of liminality to the idea, experience, and image of Eastern Europe in culture and literature hopefully expands the concept's critical potential, while preserving its core characteristics. In the context of recent critical trends, this dissertation may also contribute to the dynamic body of post-socialist studies which,

though focused on post-1989 experience of Europe, inevitably looks back on the tradition of representation and cultural memory concerning the area.

The dissertation is divided into six chapters, the last of which serves as coda to the previous discussion. Like a musical passage after which it is named, it brings together the various strands explored throughout this work from the post-1989 critical angle. The first two chapters jointly constitute the critical foundation of this work. Therefore, in "Liminality: State of the Art," I delve into the concept of liminality, charting its travels from the source—anthropology—through those disciplines and/or areas of studies where it has been productively explored to examine situations, people, places, and phenomena which elude neat conceptual compartments inviting instead more nuanced understanding oriented toward ambiguity, diversity, and transition. Since the critical potential of liminality is best revealed through examples, I move between different manifestations and applications of the idea so as to show why and how it has been used to study aspects of performance, culture, literature, space and travel, and even socio-historical phenomena. By offering this relatively broad though carefully considered selection of the uses of liminality, I demonstrate liminality's versatility and productivity as a critical tool, with a view to applying it, at different levels of analysis, to American experience of Eastern Europe as filtered through literature. In the first section of the chapter, I move back to France of the beginning of the twentieth century to trace the origins of the concept in Arnold van Gennep's work on the rites of passage. Then, I demonstrate how van Gennep's ideas were elaborated in the hands of British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner to account for the appearance of "a temporary breach of structure whereby the familiar may be stripped of certitude and the normative unhinged" to produce "a condition of growth and potential novelty" in the lives of individuals, societies, and cultures (St John 5). Drawing on several works concerned

with liminal manifestations both in tribes and modern societies, I address the shifts which the concept underwent already in Turner's writing, for instance through the introduction of the distinction between *liminal* and *liminoid*. Turner's interdisciplinary scholarship remains my point of reference throughout this chapter as I trace the ways in which liminality has been reconfigured and reapplied with respect to the anthropologist's ideas in a number of fields. Therefore, the scholar's interest in the propinquity between ritual and theater informs my discussion of performance studies as a field imbued with the spirit of liminality. Not only is performance theorized as a liminal genre located in the interstices between ritual and play, but also the very situation of performing is infused with liminal attributes. In this connection, and with a view to applying liminality to my textual material, I discuss Richard Schechner's division into *transformation* and *transportation* rituals, inspired by the above-mentioned distinction between liminal and liminoid, respectively. In so doing, I address the ways in which the division may affect liminality's critical potential, and explain why in my own application I center on liminality and its implications rather than outcomes. From performance, I move on to cultural studies to discuss *limen* as, broadly speaking, "culture's 'revolving door'—a framework enabling the possibility of more than one exit, a protostructural domain where the abandonment of form, the dissolution of fixed categories (…) enables re-creation" (St John 5). Thus, I recognize liminality's generative potential in the works of Homi Bhabha, Gloria Anzaldúa, or Mary Louise Pratt—the scholars whose views on culture favor hybridity, in-betweenness, and indeterminacy over polarizations. Bhabha's "liminal readings" of certain works of literature, where worlds and traditions collide to produce new forms of understanding, perceiving and experiencing, points the way to approaching literature as a site where liminality operates at several levels and in diverse guises. Accordingly, section 1.3.

reviews a number of ways in which liminality may permeate and even define a work of literature. My discussion is largely indebted to *Studies in Liminality and Literature*, a series of publications under the general editorship of Manuel Aguirre and Isabel Soto, which offers wide-ranging insights into uses and implications of liminality in literary criticism and beyond. Out of many possible applications of liminality to study literary texts, I show how it is employed to analyze genres, symbols, language, and characters which resist clear-cut categories, residing instead in the crevices between several traditions, modes of expression and patterns of behavior. As in the previous sections, I seek to unpack the concept by articulating its critical potential in different areas, while at the same time anticipating how it may be used in relation to my object of study.

Considering the character of the literary encounters explored in this dissertation, the following section approaches travel and space from the perspective of liminality. Thus, (air) travel is discussed as an instance of liminal in-betweeness charged with a sense of potentiality and expectancy. By the same token, airport space emerges as a transition area between here and there; a gateway to an out-of-ordinary experience of travel. Although liminal time and space are typically associated with play, transgression and liberation, they may also engender fear, danger, and even maximization of structure. This contradictory nature of threshold experiences, already recognized by Victor Turner, underpins my liminal reading of Eastern Europe. Following Bjørn Thomassen's proposition that liminal spaces may be "real places, parts or larger territory, or they can be imagined or dreamed" ("Revisiting" 21), I approach Eastern Europe as a fusion of the real and the imaginary; a liminal terrain which exists in more than one dimension, oscillating between several narratives and representations.

The penultimate section of this chapter, entitled "Liminal Modernity," probes the concept's potential to throw light on socio-historical transformations and conditions.

I rely on the work of a scholar with a truly intercultural, indeed liminal background. Born and educated in Hungary, Arpad Szakolczai earned his PhD in the United States of America and is now residing in "the West." As the sociologist himself has put it, he "experienced the Iron Curtain from the 'other' side, and gained a series of unforgettable experiences (…) that were quite different from those of most European and North-American social theorists."[3] Undoubtedly, these cross-cultural insights fuel Szakolczai's interest in liminality as an ordering tool for analyzing modernity. Given the subject of this dissertation, I focus particularly on the notion of *permanent liminality*, which Szakolczai applies to the condition of communist Eastern Europe. In a broader perspective, Szakolczai's employment of liminality demonstrates how the concept is being reconfigured in contemporary scholarship, while at the same time maintaining strong ties with the original frame of reference—which is also one of the challenges of this dissertation. In the last, concluding section I revisit liminality's implications for academic scholarship and signalize some problems which an unrestrained use of the concept may bring.

Liminality is embedded in my discussion of the idea and image of Eastern Europe, which I explore in chapter 2. My frame of reference is imagology whose concerns and methods I outline in sections 2.1 and 2.2., focusing on the cultural construction of national representations and the role preconceived notions of alterity form in approaching foreign people and places. I begin by offering a brief introduction into the tradition of imagining selfhood and otherness, which pre-dates the formal study of imagology by many centuries. Having traced the beginnings of the specialism, I proceed to outline the method of study and the vocabulary which I will later apply to analyzing American representations of Eastern European alterity in literature. Owing to

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[3] Quoted from Szakolczai's biographical profile available at http://research.ucc.ie/profiles/A024/aszakolczai/Publications.

the fact that my object of study encompasses several nations in vein with Edward Said's broad conceptual rubric of the Orient, I reach for his idea of imaginative geographies which beautifully encapsulates the practice of charting mental maps of peoples and landscapes which "articulate the desires, fantasies and fears of their authors and the grids of power between them and their 'Others'" ("Imaginative" 370). As signalized in chapter 1, Eastern Europe is a multifaceted construct which resists rigid categorization and carries a load of meanings. Thus, section 2.3. is dedicated to Eastern Europe as a storehouse of political projects and cultural perceptions. Taking my cue from Larry Wolff's influential study, I develop this argument by pointing to the designations, narratives, and representations which it comprehends. I argue that Eastern Europe is a highly malleable construct whose "geographical composition" reflects collective and individual mappings. Insofar as the shape of Eastern Europe depends on who maps the area and for what purposes, the very designation of "Eastern Europe" foregrounds the realm's *constructedness* as the same countries are subsumed under different labels catering to different kinds of perceptions and/or interests. In this connection, I briefly discuss *Central Europe* and *Mitteleuropa*—the terms/conceptions which combine *Realpolitik* with cultural mappings. Although the idea of Eastern Europe is much older than the Cold War, in this dissertation I am most interested in the perceptions and projects which fueled the Eastern Europe of the second half of the twentieth century. To this purpose, I outline the process of "making" the geopolitical construct, highlighting the interdependence between political divisions and mental boundaries. Then, in anticipation of analyzing American representations of the area, I examine the nature of cultural contacts between the West and Eastern Europe. Thus, section 2.5. poses several questions regarding Western interest in Eastern Europe in the Cold-War period: what kind of travelers visited the region, why did they travel there, and what did they make of

it? The answers I provide focus predominantly on culture—I do not analyze journeys/contacts made for strictly ideological reasons. That said, in the Eastern European context culture and politics go hand in hand, and I argue that this uneasy kinship is the axis of Western intellectual interest and representation of the area at the time. Foregrounding the importance of banned writers in shaping American hetero-images of the area, I revisit the idea of *Central Europe*, advocated by such émigré authors as Milan Kundera and Czesław Miłosz, as an intellectual counterweight to the imposed homogeneity of Eastern Europe. While I do not suggest that the American writers discussed in this dissertation consciously referred to this idea in their writings, their portrayal of Eastern Europe straddles state-imposed uniformity and drabness with cultural richness, resulting in a representation in which "Eastern Europe" competes with "Central Europe," so to say.

Finally, I trace earlier representations of the countries comprising the Eastern Europe of this dissertation in American literature, following imagology's premise that "[t]he first task is to establish the intertext of a given national representation as a trope" in order to find out how the image under analysis engages with that "background tradition" (Leerssen, "Imagology" 28). My imagological review is by no means comprehensive, but it nonetheless hopes to offer insights into American imaginative geographies of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, and, to a lesser extent, (East) Germany and Russia, focusing on how American writers perceived these countries against the rest of Europe and in relation to their home ground. In my discussion, I pay heed to the major historical events which determined international relations and shaped mutual perceptions. For obvious reasons, World War II and the subsequent world order represent such an imagological watershed in the history of

representing the Eastern European other in American literature and thus hold a significant place in my review.

Imagology frames my discussion of American literary representations of Eastern Europe, which spans three chapters dedicated to John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, and Philip Roth, respectively. The reason for the above order is twofold. First, the sequence in which I discuss their works reflects to a large degree the chronological order in which they were published. There are, however, some exceptions to this criterion. It should be noted that one of John Updike's short stories, "Bech in Czech," was published twenty years later than the other three stories. Similarly, the Roth chapter comprises two works, one of which was published in 1977 and the other in 1985. The other, more significant reason has to do with the kind of journeys that inspired these works. As mentioned earlier, Updike, Oates, and Roth all traveled to communist Eastern Europe, but their visits had a different character. Updike and Oates went there under the auspices of the United States Information Agency (USIA) as ambassadors of American culture. Instead, Roth's engagement with Prague had a private character. As the cultural emissaries of the U.S., Updike and Oates visited several countries of the Eastern Bloc and their imaginative journeys largely reflect their official itineraries. As for Roth, his Eastern Europe is embodied by Prague. In this sense, Roth's engagement with Eastern Europe offers a distinct kind of experience, which stands apart from the official cultural performance carried out by Updike and Oates.

In each chapter, I provide a detailed imagological reading in accordance with the guidelines and methods laid down in chapter 2. With a view to contextualizing the images of Eastern Europe within a broader framework of the writers' oeuvres, each analysis is preceded by a critical sketch, focusing on the relationship between the author's thematic concerns and his/her "domestic identity" (Leerssen, "Imagology" 27).

Then, I study how Eastern Europe is depicted and mapped by the authors, and to what extent these images engage with existent cultural representations of the countries making up the area. At the end of each chapter short conclusions are provided so as to draw together the different strands of analysis. This is particularly convenient in the chapters dedicated to Updike and Oates, because their images of Eastern Europe are composed of several vignettes, conveyed through individual short stories. Even though each author is discussed separately, I "cross-read" their visions of Eastern Europe to find out whether they correlate in any meaningful way. I am not, however, suggesting the possibility of an intertextual dialog between Updike, Oates, and Roth, but I rather seek to unveil common elements in their representations of Eastern European alterity, and thus figure out what these hetero-images may tell us about America at the time. Although each experience of Eastern Europe is distinct, together they form a mosaic of interlaced impressions, observations, and concerns. Like a common thread, liminality, in different guises, runs through these imaginative maps, complicating East-West binaries and blurring mutual preconceptions. Moreover, a liminal sense of potentiality infuses the characters' cross-cultural journeys, as the Eastern European locales become sites of personal reflection, inner conflict, and even physical and mental transformation.

John Updike opens up my discussion of American literary visions of the world behind the Iron Curtain. In chapter 3, I study four short stories in which Updike's protagonist, the Jewish-American author Henry Bech, journeys to Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia for the State Department in the U.S.-U.S.S.R. Cultural Exchange Program. Updike was the first of the three authors to travel to Eastern Europe and then fictionalize his experience in writing, hence his short stories offer valuable insights into relatively early Cold-War contacts between the East and the West. Furthermore, since two decades separate the first ("The Bulgarian Poetess" (1965)) and

the last story ("Bech in Czech" from 1985) it is possible to appreciate how Henry Bech's perceptions of otherness changed in time. As mentioned above, the chapter begins with a critical sketch of the author. Then, in section 3.1., I analyze Henry Bech as an "in-between character." The following sections are dedicated to four short stories which jointly constitute Henry Bech's Eastern European experience: "Rich in Russia," "Bech in Rumania," "The Bulgarian Poetess," and, finally, "Bech in Czech."

Chapter 4 is concerned with Joyce Carol Oates's fictionalized reflections on the area. I discuss five travel-inspired stories published as part of *Last Days: Stories* collection from 1984. Oates's imaginative map comprises Berlin ("Ich Bin Ein Berliner" and "Our Wall"), Warsaw ("My Warszawa: 1980") and Budapest ("Old Budapest"). In addition, the author offers an interesting portrayal of the Russian national character in "Détente," the story which I have decided to include in my discussion given its imagological import. Like in the previous chapter, I first outline the author's profile, focusing on those issues and concerns which are central to Oates's prolific and wide-ranging oeuvre. In turn, my subsequent analysis of the short stories enumerated above will allow me to find out to what extent Oates's thematic interests are reflected in her representations of Eastern European characters and locales, in addition to exploring the tensions between selfhood and otherness which these works dramatize.

In chapter 5, I examine Philip Roth's engagement with Prague through an in-depth analysis of two works: *The Professor of Desire* and *The Prague Orgy*. Already in the critical outline of the author, I anticipate Roth's avid interest in European literature, foregrounding him as a novelist whose fiction has often reached beyond the Atlantic to engage in intertextual dialogs with other authors and literatures. Subsequently, in section 5.1., due attention is devoted to the characters whom Roth destined to convey his impressions of the Czech capital: David Kepesh and Nathan Zuckerman. Finally, in

section 5.2., I provide a joint analysis of the characters' travails in Prague. As hinted earlier, this chapter differs from the other two. Not only did Roth travel to Eastern Europe on his own initiative, but also his engagement with Prague was quite intense and durable. Accordingly, my analysis of the image and significance of Prague in Roth's fiction is peppered with references to the author's personal experience of Eastern Europe; his fascination with Franz Kafka, his friendship with dissident authors, as well as his reflections on the relationship between art and politics, which Prague inspired.

The last, sixth chapter of this dissertation, which I termed "coda," is divided into two parts. In the first one, I discuss new critical perspectives and avenues of research in the study of Eastern Europe following the collapse of communism. Special attention is given to how insights and findings from postcolonial studies may productively expand critical understanding of cultures which are still coming to terms with the sociopolitical legacies of communist systems. Traditionally, codas extend upon or re-elaborate the motifs heard before. Along similar lines, I return to the themes which I have discussed in chapter 2. In particular, I revisit internal and external mental mappings related to Eastern Europe from the post-1989 perspective, arguing that they still live on even though the political divisions which sustained them are no longer there. In this connection, I also situate my own research project within the panorama of post-socialist studies, asserting the importance of liminality and image studies in the process of constructing critical vocabulary which, though mindful of Cold-War patterns of representation, "does not lean on the past to make its point, but rather encourages and creates access to new ways of thinking" (Freedman 208). In the second part of the chapter, I carry out a joint imagological analysis of four works written after 1989. These are Eva Hoffman's *Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe* (1993), Arthur Phillips's *Prague* (2002), John Beckman's *The Winter Zoo* (2002), and

The Russian Debutante's Handbook (2002) by Gary Shteyngart. Except for Hoffman's, the other titles are debut works. Like Updike, Oates, and Roth, all the authors traveled to Eastern Europe and their works were inspired by these transatlantic journeys. On the one hand, the encounters which they map resemble those depicted in the previous works in that they share the liminal element of travel and are permeated with a sense of transitoriness. Most American expatriates portrayed by Phillips, Beckman, and Shteyngart are mere passengers whose sojourns in Eastern Europe always end with a journey back home. On the other hand, however, they also provide insights into new post-communist dynamics, and, notably, introduce new kind of American explorers of Eastern Europe. As for the former, it is best visible in Eva Hoffman's work which portrays Eastern Europe at the moment of *crossing the threshold* between the "old" and the "new." In the context of this dissertation, *Exit into History* also bridges the gap between the last pre-1989 American representation of Eastern Europe, Roth's *The Prague Orgy*, and the new literary voices mapping the area. While still informed by "old" cultural patterns of perception, these new imaginative geographies chart also new mental maps shaped by the interests and anxieties driving the travelers. That said, I argue that liminality remains a valid tool for analyzing American experience of newly de-communized Eastern Europe at the times when *transition* was the status quo. The dissertation ends with conclusions in which I summarize my findings and reflections, and suggest implications for future research.

1. Liminality: State of the Art

The concept of *liminality* comes originally from anthropology but has traveled far beyond its native discipline over the years. A scholar who approaches liminality for the first time may feel overwhelmed not only by the number of fields in which it has been applied so far, but also by the lack of a clearly-defined *theory* of liminality, beyond anthropology. While there are numerous essay collections exploring the concept within a variety of contexts, there is hardly a comprehensive guide or companion to liminality.[4] This is perhaps due to the fact that, as Manuel Aguirre, Roberta Quance, and Philip Sutton point out, liminality is not a categorical concept but rather a functional category which depends "on the culture, the viewpoint, and many other factors" (69). Another reason may be the very nature of the notion which is often described in terms of ambivalence, uncertainty, instability, and paradox. Liminality plays with traditional binary oppositions of structure and chaos but cannot be classified as either of them. Instead, it forces us to pay attention to the interstices that emerge between them and to what happens there. Therefore, liminality may be a useful tool for exploring equivocal and indeterminate spaces, processes, and phenomena that do not lend themselves to a more structured analysis. The concept's unswerving popularity, both in academia and beyond it, is perhaps a sign of the times. After all, Zygmunt Bauman's diagnosis of modernity and life as *liquid*, that is precarious, full of uncertainty, and always in flux, has much in common with liminality, which welcomes ambiguity, hybridity, and change.[5]

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[4] More systematic approach to liminality has been offered by Bjørn Thomassen, who analyzes it with respect to three main categories: subject, temporal dimension, and spatial dimension ("The Uses" 16).

[5] The relationship between liminality and Bauman's liquid modernity has been also discussed by Emma Cocker in "Border Crossing: Practices for Beating the Bounds" in *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces In-between* (2013).

In what follows, the concept is defined, contextualized, and discussed in relation to several areas it influenced, with particular emphasis on literary studies. I begin by tracing liminality back to its native discipline, anthropology, through the writings of Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. Then, the paradigm is briefly explored in relation to the field where its impact has been perhaps most tangible—performance studies. I move on to cultural studies to demonstrate the concept's presence in academic scholarship oriented toward postcolonial voices, hybrid cultures and productive contact zones. Given the focus of the present work, special attention is devoted to the way liminality manifests itself in literature, in terms of both form and content. In addition, I take a closer look at liminality's implications for space and travel, which have a significant bearing on my argument. Finally, Arpad Szakolczai's work is analyzed with a view to probing liminality's potential for illuminating large socio-historical phenomena. Throughout the chapter, Turner's works are referred to frequently, so that it is possible to see how the original concept has been re-interpreted and re-configured in different disciplines. The chapter ends with a summary of possible applications and manifestations of liminality, as well as limitations and problems it may occasion.

1.1. Liminality within Its Original Context

Liminality as an anthropological concept was established by a noted French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957). Van Gennep's list of publications contains more than four hundred works, but the scholar is probably best known for his study of rites of passage and the ceremonies associated with them. In his most famous publication, *Les rites de passage* (*The Rites of Passage*) from 1909, the scholar posits that the life of an individual in any society is formed by a series of

passages from one age group to another, and from one social situation to the next (3).[6]

In the case of tribal societies, such passages are accompanied by special ceremonies which bring out the sacred element in them. Van Gennep proposes a classification of all existing rites, placing particular emphasis on the category of the rite of passage. According to the ethnographer, each rite of passage serves a particular purpose, but their overall goal is to "insure a change of condition or a passage from one magico-secular group to another" (11). Van Gennep divides them into three subcategories: rites of separation (preliminal), transition rites (liminal), and rites of reincorporation (postliminal). Importantly, although a complete rite of passage theoretically includes all three subcategories, they are not always equally significant or elaborated (11). For instance, rites of separation are especially conspicuous in funeral ceremonies, while transition rites are most prominent in pregnancy or initiation. Sometimes one subcategory may be sufficiently developed to constitute an independent state, like a betrothal, which is considered to be a liminal period between adolescence and marriage (11). In other words, these three subcategories are not necessarily elaborated to the same degree by all communities or in all ceremonies. Having analyzed rituals and ceremonies of passage in many diverse cultures, van Gennep arrived at three major conclusions. Firstly, although the position and duration of each constitutive phase may vary depending on the occasion, the underlying assumption remains unchanged: "Beneath a multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: *the pattern of the rites of passage*" (191). Secondly, the ethnographer pointed to "the existence of transitional periods which sometimes acquire certain autonomy," such as the above-mentioned premarital engagement (191). Finally, he identified the transition from one social position to another with a territorial passage, i.e.

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[6] All quotations come from an English-language edition of van Gennep's work.

a movement in space which implies crossing some kind of threshold which separates two worlds. The person passing from one system to the other becomes immersed "physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds" (18). The author clearly recognized the importance of his contribution when he said: "I confess sincerely that though I set little store by my other books, my *Rites de Passage* is like a part of my flesh, and was the result of a kind of inner illumination that suddenly dispelled a sort of darkness in which I had been floundering for almost ten years (qtd. in Belier 146). Furthermore, van Gennep was convinced that the pattern established in *The Rites of Passage* was universal enough to be used outside his research area: "I believe (…) that my demonstration is adequate, and I invite the reader to check it by applying the conceptual scheme of *The Rites of Passage* to data in his own realm of study," he said in the preface to the study (vii).

It would have seemed only natural if van Gennep's innovative ideas had been instantly adopted and further developed by other anthropologists. However, that was not the case, and the scholar's work had remained virtually neglected for five decades. Bjørn Thomassen, a Danish anthropologist and social scientist, attributes it to academic power politics and scholarly rivalry between van Gennep and Émile Durkheim and his circle, who represented dominant trends in the discipline at the time.[7] Despite his impressive scholarly oeuvre, van Gennep remained an outcast from French academic life. He never held a position at a French university, and preferred to work in solitude, which earned him the sobriquet of "the hermit of Bourg-la-Reine" (Zumwalt 1). Consequently, van Gennep's work had not been known outside France until the 1960s when British anthropologists took a renewed interest in French contributions to the

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[7] The conflict was probably due to theoretical and methodological differences between them, as well as van Gennep's persistent criticism of Durkheim's work, especially his 1912 *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. The discord between van Gennep and the Durkhemians soon became irreconcilable, and from 1924 onward Durkheim's journal, *L'Année Sociologique*, stopped reviewing van Gennep's work (Thomassen, "The Uses" 9).

field, and many French works were translated into English. Among them was also van Gennep's *Les rites de passage*, whose English-language edition was published in 1960. The study compelled attention of Victor Turner, a British cultural anthropologist who is credited with rediscovering van Gennep's contribution, especially the concept of liminality. Apparently, Turner was himself living in a state of uncertainty when he first came across van Gennep's work on rites. Having resigned from a post at the University of Manchester, he was living in the coastal town of Hastings, waiting for his American visa to be issued. This is how Edith Turner, the scholar's wife and anthropologist herself, recalled this liminal moment: "We were in a state of suspense. The place of our waiting was on the margin of the sea, roughly at the spot where William the Conqueror first penetrated Britain—which was an event known to the English as a changing point in history; while Hastings itself was felt to be a threshold, a gateway" (qtd. in R. Daly 70). Turner instantly recognized the importance of van Gennep's findings and wrote an essay inspired by his ideas: "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*." The essay was published as one of the chapters of Turner's study of Ndembu tribe from Zambia, entitled *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (1967). In the book, the anthropologist reiterates van Gennep's claim that rites of passage are common to all societies and imply transition between states (93). The essay focuses on arguably the most interesting and productive stage of van Gennep's structure of a rite of passage; the liminal period and its sociocultural properties. To illustrate how it operates, Turner draws a distinction between "state" and "transition." The former is defined as "a relatively fixed or stable condition," such as social, legal or professional status, degree, or rank, but also a person's culturally recognized level of maturation (93). Furthermore, the term may also refer to a physical, mental or emotional condition in which an individual or a group may be found at a particular time. This comprehensive definition

of state as a relatively stable condition is then contrasted with the idea of transition as a process, a becoming, or even a transformation. Therefore, a liminal period involves passing from one state to another through an intermediate realm which has "few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state" (94). This, in turn, implies that during the liminal stage the established order and traditional norms are held in abeyance. Accordingly, the subjects undergoing the process of transition, the so-called transitional beings, are characterized by "ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all customary categories" (97).[8] Following British social anthropologist Mary Douglas, Turner sees transitional beings as potentially polluting and even threatening to society, given their uncertain "betwixt and between" status. In other words, being ambiguous and thus impossible to define and categorize makes them impure and dangerous. This seemingly negative status of transitional beings, represented by symbols associated with death, decomposition, and catabolism, is offset by the imagery of rebirth and renewal, which jointly reflect the paradoxical and ambiguous nature of liminality. As such, the process may be seen as "the Nay to all positive structural assertions, but as in some sense the source of them all, and, more than that, a realm of pure possibility whence novel configurations of ideas and relations may arise" (Turner, "Betwixt" 97). Therefore, those undergoing transition are separated from the well-known and familiar and divested of their habitual thinking, feeling and acting. Meanwhile, they are made to reflect on their society and the powers that generate and sustain it (105). Drawing on rituals performed in various indigenous cultures, Turner claims that liminality implies transformation of the subject who emerges from the rite not only equipped with fresh knowledge but also as a *new* being: "The arcane knowledge or "gnosis" obtained in the liminal period is felt to change the inmost nature of the neophyte, impressing him, as a

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[8] So precarious is the situation of liminal transition that the neophytes tend to be accompanied by masters of ceremonies or guardians who guide them through this ambivalent and unfamiliar period.

seal impresses wax, with the characteristics of his new state" (102). Turner concludes

the essay by inviting scholars to focus their attention on liminal processes, as they may

"paradoxically expose the building blocks of culture just when we pass out of and

before we re-enter the structural realm" (110).

"Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*" is just one

essay in a series of works where the emphasis is on liminality. The concept is revisited

in *The Ritual Process*: *Structure and Anti-Structure* (1969), a compilation of lectures

presented by Turner at the University of Rochester in 1966. In the chapter entitled

"Liminality and Communitas," Turner once again resorts to the conceptual scheme

devised by van Gennep, but this time liminality provides him also with a framework to

study culture and society in more general terms, beyond the world of tribal rituals. As

Thomassen has rightly observed, the travels made by liminality beyond its original

context started already in Turner's own work ("The Uses 14). The anthropologist

introduces a Latin term *communitas* to refer to the absence of structure that emerges in

liminal situations. He explains communitas in terms of an inter-human relationship

based on common humanity rather than established hierarchy. Communitas implies

temporality, spontaneity, and totality; it "breaks in through interstices of structure, in

liminality; at the edges of structures, in marginality; and from beneath structure in

inferiority" (128). Turner moves away from the original context of small-scale societies

by pointing out the presence of communitas in the Western world.[9] To illustrate the

productive anti-structure that emerges in liminal situations, Turner often draws from

world literature. This comes as little surprise given Turner's educational background—

prior to enrolling at the Manchester School of British Social Anthropology, he had

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[9] Turner recognizes the values of communitas in the behavior and literary output of the Beat Generation and the hippy movement in the United States of America. Their insistence on spontaneity and immediacy, together with their deep disregard for social hierarchies and obligations as well as emphasis on inter-personal relations and sexual freedom, place them in the realm of the liminal and the structureless.

studied poetry and classics at the University College in London (St John 2). Moreover, from his earliest years Turner had been fascinated by literature and theater and found them to be a fecund source of social and cultural patterns (E. Turner 164).[10] In discussing the so-called liminal beings, the anthropologist refers to those works of Anton Chekhov, Mark Twain, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky which feature the archetypical figure of a stranger or a poor and weak person who, despite his/her inferior and marginal status, is capable of restoring moral and ethical equilibrium in the world dominated by evil and injustice. Moreover, the very nature of communitas is conveyed through fragments of William Blake's poetry, while the coexistence of structure and communitas is represented by Dante's heaven. Importantly, liminality is thought to provide a fertile environment for artistic production; myths, symbols, and works of art are often generated in such conditions. In fact, Turner sees artists as liminal beings who "strive with a passionate sincerity to rid themselves of the clichés associated with status incumbency and role-playing and to enter into vital relations with other men in fact or imagination" (128). While there is much to be said about the transformative and generative potential of liminality, it also carries elements of risk, danger, and threat. At times, exaggeration of communitas outside or against the law may lead to maximization of structure, "despotism, overbureaucratization, or other modes of structural rigidification" (129). Therefore, it follows that there is a close connection between liminality, communitas, and structure, to the point that one cannot exist without the other. Ideally, one should strive to maintain the values of communitas while being part of a structure.

In more general terms, Turner's study yields some interesting observations as to the nature of liminality. The concept is employed with reference to both phenomena and

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[10] Thus, to explain the workings of communitas, Turner resorts to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610-1611) where Gonzalo describes an ideal commonwealth bound together by such human values as peace, harmony, love, and justice, rather than any arbitrarily-imposed structure.

people. Liminal personae include court jesters, artists, and writers.[11] Essentially, liminality is driven by several sets of binary oppositions, among which there are structure and anti-structure; inferiority (or marginality) and superiority; chaos vs. creation; generative and transformative power vs. potential risk and threat. In a word, ambiguity and paradox are liminality's defining features. Lastly, it is manifested in tribal rites of passage, but also Western subcultures or religious movements. Therefore, the presence of liminality is not restricted to tribes but may also imbue large-scale industrial societies.

The last proposition is revisited in Turner's seminal essay "Liminal to Liminoid, in Play, Flow, and Ritual: An Essay in Comparative Symbology," where he introduces the idea of the *liminoid*. Both terms share the same lexical root and echo van Gennep's original idea. Liminoid carries the suffix "oid," which means "similar to" or "like." Therefore, while the concepts have much in common, there are also some crucial differences between them. Essentially, liminal and liminoid refer to the middle phase of a rite of passage which signifies passing through "a period and area of ambiguity, a sort of social limbo" (Turner, "Liminal" 57). However, liminal applies to tribal, small-scale societies where rites of passage form an integral part of people's lifecycle, while liminoid pertains to complex, industrial societies. To clarify this point, Turner introduces three key concepts: *work*, *play*, and *leisure*. In tribal, small-scale societies, rituals belong to the realm of work, which can be either sacred (the work of gods) or profane (the work of humans). Namely, rituals form part of the "universe of work" (63); they are obligatory for the whole community and have pivotal consequences for its general well-being. They may involve elements of play, but they should not be interpreted in the context of leisure as we know it today. Turner understands modern

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[11] For instance, Russian author Leo Tolstoy, who at fifty underwent a religious crisis which led him to shed the norms and privileges of his social class to live a humble existence of a peasant.

leisure as a product of the Industrial Revolution which represents two kinds of freedom. On the one hand, it is freedom from "a whole heap of institutional obligations" and "the forced and chronologically regulated rhythms of factory and office" (68). On the other hand, however, it provides "*freedom* to (…) generate new symbolic worlds of entertainment," as well as "*freedom* to transcend social structural limitations, freedom to play-with ideas, with fantasies, with words" (68). In light of this distinction, literature and art are regarded as products of leisure, and as such should not be deemed liminal but liminoid phenomena. There are further distinctions between the two categories but the major difference seems to lie in the degree of freedom:[12] the liminoid is freer than the liminal, because it is a matter of choice, not obligation. In Turner's words, "[o]ne *works* at the liminal, one *plays* with the liminoid" (86).

It is the ideas presented in this essay that had a major impact on anthropology, as they inspired Turner's students to interpret art, theater and literature as in-between phenomena developed away from the confining structures of society (Thomassen, "The Uses" 15). Nevertheless, some modern scholars of liminality are hesitant to endorse the division into liminal and liminoid, claiming that it sidelines some potentially dangerous or problematic facets of the concept. According to Bjørn Thomassen, by relegating liminal phenomena in modern society to the realm of the playful, Turner deprives them of their transformative potential, which is, after all, a central feature of liminality ("The Uses" 15). Consequently, the concept is curtailed to function within broadly understood culture but not outside it, for instance, to study large-scale political and social

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[12] Turner associates liminal phenomena with collectivity, while liminoid ones are often products of individuals, though they may have collective or mass impact. Furthermore, liminal phenomena represent and draw from collective meaning, experience and history of a given community, while liminoid phenomena have more idiosyncratic character, as they are frequently generated by individuals acting on their own or as representatives of particular groups, like schools or circles. The latter usually "develop apart from the central economic and political processes, along the margins, in the interfaces and interstices of central and servicing institutions," whereas liminal phenomena are "centrally integrated into the total social process" (85).

transformations. In the following section, I will show how the idea of liminality has transcended the limitations imposed, paradoxically, by its principal scholar.

1.2 Liminality outside Anthropology Proper: Implications for Performance and Cultural Studies

Among many disciplines influenced by the notion of liminality, the field of performance studies remains perhaps the most prominent example. Performance itself is often regarded as a genre that operates on the threshold between theater and ritual. As one critic put it, "its limen is the theatricalization of ritual and the ritualization of theatre" (McKenzie 26). In fact, one version of the history of performance studies has it that the field was born out of a fruitful collaboration between Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, the founder of the first Performance Studies Department at New York University (Phelan 3).[13] In the 1970s and 1980s the emerging field was strongly influenced by anthropology—especially the paradigm of ritual played a significant role in conceptualizing performance (Schechner, *Performance* 17). In the broadest sense of the word, performance encompasses a variety of human actions ranging from performing arts (music, dance, theater), through sports, rituals, healing, and popular entertainment, among others (Schechner, "Performance" 7). All these actions consist of *ritualized* gestures and sounds, i.e. behavior which is not purely spontaneous and original but has been prepared and rehearsed in advance. Understood as "twice-behaved, coded, transmittable behavior," performance is an outcome of interactions between ritual and play, both of which entail a possibility of entering a reality which is

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[13] The two men first met in 1977, when Turner invited Schechner to participate in a conference on "Ritual, Drama, and Spectacle." According to Schechner, there was so much positive chemistry between him and Turner that they went on to plan a World Conference on Ritual and Performance together. The collaboration shaped Schechner's idea of what performance studies should become.

removed from ordinary, everyday life (Schechner, *Performance* 52). It is in this new reality that people can become somebody else, performing actions which they would not do in their daily lives. In other words, both ritual and play hold the promise of *transforming* those who partake in them.[14] Interestingly, they share not only a common purpose, but also elements of structure. Van Gennep's pattern of a rite of passage and especially its middle liminal stage is particularly pertinent to the workings of a theatrical performance. Richard Schechner employs the notion of a limen as a physical threshold separating and simultaneously linking two areas, to theorize theatrical space and what transpires within it. Thus, the limen expands, physically and conceptually, into an empty theater space which is open to innumerable possibilities, and may be converted into almost any place by means of performing.[15] In fact, the liminal nature of theater comes to the fore already at the workshop-rehearsal stage in performance composition.[16] Personal and professional differences are set aside; the subjects are liberated from the constraints of everyday existence and immersed in the common experience of art-making. In a similar vein, acting is also considered to be a "betwixt and between" condition. When actors perform they are not themselves, nor are they the characters they represent. In Schechner's words, "[t]heatrical role-playing takes place between 'not me…not not me'" (*Performance* 72). The setting in which performance takes place

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[14] The relationship between ritual and performance was recognized by Émile Durkheim, van Gennep's academic rival, more than a hundred years ago. The ethnographer compared the rites performed by Native Australians to dramatic representations in that both "employ the same processes as real drama, but they also pursue an end of the same sort: being foreign to all utilitarian ends, they make men forget the real world and transport them into another where their imagination is more at ease; they distract" (380).

[15] This "betwixt and between" quality of theater is evident in the architectural design; the front frame of a proscenium stage functions as a limen "connecting the imaginary worlds performed onstage to the daily lives of spectators in the house" (Schechner, *Performance* 67).

[16] Interestingly, performance workshops are usually accompanied by rites of entry echoing those performed in tribal societies. Therefore, a simple activity of cleaning the floor, which involves all participants regardless of their position in the hierarchy, creates the feeling of communitas (Schechner, *Performance* 72).

contributes to the sense of in-betweeness, creating a "highly charged in-between space-time, a liminal space-time" (*Performance* 72).

Following Turner's division into liminal and liminoid, Schechner distinguishes between rituals which bring *transformation* and those that enable *transportation*. The former are permanent in nature and involve life-changing experience. Liminoid rituals, however, trigger only a temporary change; "sometimes nothing more than a brief communitas experience or a several-hours-long playing of a role" (*Performance* 72). A subject that is being *transported* becomes immersed in the experience, and thus moved and affected by it, but at the end he/she is "dropped off about where he or she entered" (*Performance* 72). The Turnerian dichotomy, however, is not unproblematic, because it implies that performance pertains to the domain of the liminoid, whereas the liminal takes place only within the context of rites. Yet, according to Schechner, transportation and transformation are not mutually exclusive. What makes them different is the frequency of occurrence; a person may be transported almost on a daily basis, while transformation happens just a few times in life, if ever. While most theatrical performances seem to fall into the category of transportation rituals, some may be endowed with transformative potential, both for the subject enacting the performance as well as those who partake in it, whether passively or actively. In the context of this dissertation, Schechner's reflections raise an important question about the *measurability* of transformation. In traditional rites of passage, transformation tends to be visibly marked.[17] However, outside the realm of rites, and particularly in the modern, highly individualistic world, it is difficult to assess whether and to what extent transformation

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[17] Suffice it to mention the Jewish ritual of *brit milah*, in which an eight-day-old male infant is circumcised by a designated person called *mohel*. In symbolic terms, the act of removing the foreskin represents the covenant between God and man. At the same time, the physical trace obtained during the ritual marks the child as a member of the Jewish community. Through the ceremony, he becomes physically and symbolically transformed, even though the transition takes place without his conscious knowledge.

has taken place. We might speculate, but there is hardly a definite answer to this question. In fact, it seems that it is the "betwixt and between" quality of liminality, rather than the condition's outcome, that has most influenced performance studies and, as I will show in the course of this chapter, other areas of research. This, I believe, might stem from the fact that transformation remains one of the most problematic and debatable issues within the scholarship on liminality. To put it bluntly, if transformation is treated as an inherent and obligatory component of a liminal phenomenon or experience under analysis, then the concept's critical potential is seriously weakened. Accordingly, even a cursory glance at the body of work inspired by Turner's ideas shows that "liminality" has gained more currency than a more restrictive notion of "the liminoid." Thus, liminality is used as an analytical tool for a variety of phenomena, notwithstanding their possible outcomes or the context in which they occur or are enacted. In other words, the sharp distinction between liminal and liminoid, and hence transformation and transportation, seems to have blurred around the edges; the concept has been detached from its original frame of reference, but at the same time its productive possibilities have been expanded.

Among many disciplines influenced by the idea of liminality, Bjorn Thomassen highlights psychology, sociology, tourism studies, organizational theory, and even business consultancy ("The Uses" 19). The concept has also been productively explored to study culture, particularly understood in terms of productive tensions between center and periphery. The following examples vividly display liminality's presence in (postcolonial) cultural studies. They also illustrate my point that even if there is no explicit connection between the creative reworking of liminality and its original frame of reference—the rites of passage—it is still infused with the essential attributes of the

transition stage: ambiguity, diversity, and friction understood as fertile conditions for new configurations and outcomes.

In this sense, Homi Bhabha's views on the location of culture resonate with the spirit of liminality. Bhabha, who is considered to be one of the most prominent figures in postcolonial studies, might be called a liminal figure himself. Born into the Parsi community of Bombay, Bhabha left India to study English literature at Oxford, where he also received his PhD. Living at the threshold of two cultures, the Indian and the British, and working "with the contradictory strains of languages *lived*, and languages *learned*" proved to be a "remarkable critical and creative impulse" for studying culture emerging in the interstices (Bhabha, *The Location* x). The scholar's attention was directed toward the canonical center of traditional English literary studies and how it lacked "a rich and paradoxical engagement with the pertinence of what lay in an *oblique* or alien relation to the forces of centering" (*The Location* xi). Rather than differentiate between the dominant and the marginal, Bhabha proposes to look for culture beyond narratives of power and prejudice, at the intersections and in the crevices between traditional polarizations. What emerges in this intervening space or the "interstitial passage" located between "fixed identifications" is cultural hybridity, which displaces traditional binary logic and "entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (*The Location* 4). To illustrate this hypothesis, Bhabha resorts to examples from art and literature, among others. For instance, the African-American artist Renée Green's architectural work, "Sites of Genealogy," plays with and deconstructs binary opposites of Black/White, Self/Other, "through which identities of difference are often constructed" (*The Location* 3). The scholar outlines how Green adopts the museum space to map this polarity onto the architectural design, with the stairwell as a liminal zone embodying the symbolic interaction between the polar categories of upper and

lower, black and white. As a result, Green's object of art serves as a pointer toward a representation of culture as an in-between space attuned to mixture and difference.

Limen as a site from which, as Bhabha repeats after Martin Heidegger, "*something begins its presencing*" is also analyzed by Spanish critic, Jesús Benito Sánchez (*The Location* 7). The scholar explores threshold's productive potential by examining the borderland space between Mexico and the U.S.: "a narrow and empty strip of land delineated by two parallel fences of barbed wire" ("The Crossing" 76). Ideally, this interspace should be neutral and empty, but the constant presence of police patrols guarding the border against trespassers signals its contradictory nature. Paradoxically, the police forces are there "to certify an absence, the emptiness of the area" ("The Crossing" 76). Instead of being empty and neutral, the space is charged with meaning; whatever happens there will be interpreted as illegal and perverted. Benito Sánchez proposes to read this in-between area not just as a concrete geographical space highly charged with political meaning, but also as a metaphor for sociocultural interactions in the contemporary U.S. The scholar's interpretation emphasizes the dynamic quality inherent in the concept of limen. Like a shoreline seen from a bird's eye view, the threshold may seem to be a stable, permanent entity; however, close observation renders it as a site of transition and movement.[18] The productive poetics of threshold is influentially explored in Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987), where the U.S.-Mexican borderland is conceptualized as a painful, multi-layered site where "the third world grates against the first and bleeds" to form "a third country, a border culture" (25). This new, open-ended terrain resulting from the

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[18] The dynamic, open-ended nature of limen may be also recognized in the idea of *the Middle Passage*, understood not as a "single liquid line of the ocean into a better world," as slavery ideology would have it, but as "a stage where something happens, or a zone that refuses to be emptied out and transformed into a line" (Benito Sánchez, "The Crossing" 81). This interpretation evokes Paul Gilroy's powerful concept of *the Black Atlantic* as a dynamic, hybrid space of transnational cultural construction whose organizing symbol is a ship: "a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion" (4).

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disturbing yet productive tensions between different social, cultural, and linguistic systems is the Chicano culture manifested, among others, through a liminal linguistic reality: an amalgam of English and Spanish. *La frontera* is thus a space where traditional boundaries become deconstructed and cultures collide to produce new syncretic forms.

Along similar lines, Mary Louise Pratt's notion of "contact zones" can be read in terms of productive, changeable liminal spaces. Drawing on a seventeenth-century *autoethnographic text*, "in which people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them," Pratt proposes to view this kind of hybrid literature as a product of the contact zone between cultures which "meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (34-35).[19] Later in this dissertation, I apply the notion of liminal contact zone to Philip Roth's representation of Prague, as a productive space of intercultural dialog between the West and the East. The idea of a work of literature as a contact zone between diverse cultures is also explored in Benito Sánchez's reading of ethnic American texts. The scholar employs the metaphor of a trickster, a borderline being par excellence, to spell out the liminal nature of this particular type of literature. Like a trickster, ethnic American texts pertain to at least two different cultures, the quality which makes them "inevitably doubly voiced, split at the very moment of production" (Benito Sánchez, "The Crossing" 84). In a way similar to autoethnographic

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[19] Pratt's point of departure is a seventeenth-century twelve-hundred page letter written by a native Andean, Guaman Poma, to King Philip III of Spain. Written in an amalgam of indigenous Quechua and incorrect Spanish, the manuscript chronicles the history and culture of Inca and pre-Inca people, constructing an alternative picture of the Christian world, with the Amerindians rather than Europeans at the center of it. Texts like Poma's letter were addressed both to the dominant and the author's own culture, and may have constituted "a marginalized group's point of entry into the dominant circuits of print culture" (Pratt 35). Therefore, they may be described as liminal in that they construct a middle space between the dominant and the subordinate, rewriting the simplistic linear discourse, favored by the former, and engaging in more intricate processes of transculturation. Clearly, Pratt's line of thinking is grounded in the view of cultures as dynamic, fluid spaces rather than structured and monolithic ones.

texts, from the convergence of different cultures a new intervening space comes into being—Bhabha's realm of the beyond; the location of hybrid culture.

Pratt's and Sánchez's readings of autoethnographic and ethnic texts in terms of productive contact zones intimate liminality's potential to study literature both in content and form. Along similar lines, Homi Bhabha analyzes how hybrid culture is manifested in certain works of literature, and what shape it may assume. In Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), cross-cultural forces driving Isabel Archer from the United States to Europe culminate in the condition of the *unhomely* which Bhabha reinterprets as "the relocation of the home and the world," a sense of displacement in which the boundaries between the private and the public become blurred resulting in estrangement and disorientation ("The World" 141). Isabel's "extra-territorial initiation" brings about the feeling of displacement which ultimately turns her Florence mansion into a site of dumbness, darkness, and suffocation; a threshold at which the unhomely operates. The scholar draws also on Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) to demonstrate how the private space of a house turns into an unhomely world in which "the violence of a racialized society falls most enduringly on the details of life" (*The Location* 15). In other words, the private and the public conflate violently to produce a disturbing sense of the unhomely, relating "the traumatic ambivalence of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (*The Location* 15). While Bhabha admits that the unhomely is a "paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition," he recognizes its presence in "fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural difference in a range of transhistorical sites" (*The Location* 13). Drawing on this proposition, I use the notion of the unhomely to account for the protagonist's sense of displacement in Joyce Carol Oates's "My Warszawa: 1980." In the story, Oates poignantly portrays how the safe microcosm of the character's American self is threatened to the point of collapse

through confronting the memory of collective trauma ingrained in the historic substance of this Eastern European city. Although Bhabha does not explicitly refer to Victor Turner in his work on hybrid culture, it is quite clear that the examples he provides to illustrate how it is manifested in the works of art and world literature are permeated with the essence of liminality: the displacement of polarities and a dynamic interdependence between the creative and the productive, and the elements of fear and danger that liminal conditions may provoke.

In the above-mentioned instances, it is the physical dwelling that functions as a symbolic limen at which the binary forces clash to produce a "third world" exposing, to borrow Victor Turner's words "the building blocks of culture," which is not stable and uniform but dynamic and conflictual ("Betwixt" 110). Limen, it seems, always operates as a transition area generated between at least two discourses and sharing in two or more poetics. One critic even goes as far as to suggest that it is the right metaphor to discuss literature at large, because it combines real and imaginary worlds that ultimately produce an "isolated, intermediate world" (Ratiani n. pag.). Bhabha, for his part, envisions world literature in terms of a transnational terrain whose major theme would no longer be either "transmission of national traditions" or "the universalism of human culture," but rather recognition of self in otherness, embodied by "transnational histories of migrants, the colonized, or political refugees" (*The Location* 17). In a similar vein though with a different focus, Manuel Aguirre, Roberta Quance, and Philip Sutton challenge the view that literature is a pure cultural category which can be studied in opposition to other forms, such as folklore:

> The truth of things is that each text, genre or tradition is but a meeting point of heterogeneous, often conflicting usages, conventions, styles, concepts, intentions, etc., striving for various degrees of compromise. As a system,

furthermore, every literary object is the product of an interaction with other systems and is therefore a "hybrid" form (15).

More specifically, in text studies the concept of threshold provides a point of departure for exploring productive liminal indeterminacy in such categories as literary genres, motifs, or characters. While some instances of cultural liminality studied above are manifested in textual forms, their primary aim has been to expose the workings of hybrid culture understood in terms of dynamic negotiations between fixed categories of margin and center. In what follows, the focus shifts to liminality as a functional tool for studying specific textual forms and categories.

1.3. Crossing the Threshold: Fluid Genres and Liminal Elements in Literature

When applied to literature, liminality tends to operate on more than one level, manifesting itself in categories and elements related to both form and content. Folktale, fairy tale, Gothic fiction, the fantastic, and comic are often cited as examples of liminal genres par excellence. As far as the folktale is concerned, Aguirre emphasizes that it exists in different forms, none of which can be regarded as the standard or the original ("Austin's Cat" 15). This is due to the oral provenance of folktales which are collective cultural manifestations rather than individual, definitive creations. Folktale's liminality is, in turn, reflected in fairy tales, which are defined as a "borderline, transitional genre always bearing the traces of orality, tradition, and socio-cultural performance" (Bachillega 3). Similar in-betweeness and ambiguity characterizes also the fantastic, which "seems to be located on the frontier of two genres, the marvelous and the uncanny, rather than to be an autonomous genre" (Todorov 41). Gothic fiction is often described as a site of interaction between such literary forms as eighteenth-century

novel, medieval romance, folktale, etc. Interestingly, all the forms of artistic and cultural expression mentioned above have been *marginalized* at some point or remain at the *margin* of literature "proper," due to their ambiguous, liminal character that does not lend itself to neat classification. Their peripheral position seems to be an outcome of unresolved tensions between two polar categories, that of the canonized literary tradition on the one hand, and the so-called popular fiction on the other. However, as Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton point out, the two often overlap, as is the case with postmodernist fiction, which disrupts traditional boundaries by borrowing thematic and structural strategies from "outside the literary canon, from across the threshold" (29).[20] Thus, the liminal in literature represents an intermediate space capable of accommodating hybrid genres without relegating them to the margin. In addition, this inclusive realm promises to be more than just a meeting point or, to employ computer terminology, an interface between the traditional and the popular. Instead, it may function as an "area of active mediation" (Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton 31) conveying themes, structures and techniques between cultural systems, much in vein with Mary Louise Pratt's idea of productive contact zones. To provide an example, even though the above-mentioned Gothic fiction remains on the outskirts of literary canon, it has exerted a considerable influence on dominant modes of writing and prominent authors, e.g. Charles Dickens, and has been the subject of numerous scholarly studies. Similarly, the poetics of myths, legends and fairy tales permeate works of William Shakespeare, D.H. Lawrence or Margaret Atwood, to name but a few diverse authors, attesting to the productive potential of these in-between genres.

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[20] For instance, Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985) exploits the popular detective novel while establishing intertextual links with one of the pillars of the international literary canon—Cervantes's *Don Quixote* (1605 and 1615). Along similar lines, the artistic output of the Beat Generation, listed by Victor Turner among liminal phenomena, combines written work with elements associated with "non-literary" culture, such as folklore, music, art, etc.

Liminal poetics operates also at the level of literary motifs and symbolism. Therefore, in Gothic fiction the structure of the plot often relies on the accumulation of gates, doors, stairs, passages, in a word, "spaces to be traversed, thresholds to be crossed" (Aguirre, "Narrative" 140).[21] The same holds true for fairy tales, where a threshold is a crucial trope dividing the real from the magical and simultaneously providing a passageway from one system to the other. As the critic Gillian Beer points out, domestic thresholds such as mirrors and windows are potent narrative devices, catering to a variety of meanings and conveying disparate social realities. Thus, the window can be said to express privilege and exclusion, as in Elisabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (1840), which contrasts brightly-lit shop windows, reserved for the well-off, with dim, windowless cellars where the poor live (Beer 7). Here the window functions as an impenetrable boundary between two worlds; a token of social class. One may look through it, like Yeats's schoolboy "with his nose and face pressed to a sweet-shop window," but cannot cross the threshold it stands for (qtd. in Beer 8).[22] Conversely, sometimes hard glass acquires unexpected plasticity, providing passageway to dream-like states, as in the case of Alice:

> Let's pretend the glass has got all soft like gauze, so that we can get through. Why, it's turning into a sort of mist now, I declare! It'll be easy enough to get through (…). And certainly the glass *was* beginning to melt away, just like a

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[21] Veils, doors, windows or prohibitions that should not be lifted, opened and violated, respectively, feature prominently in some of the classic Gothic stories, such as Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) or Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818).

[22] Thresholds may be also interpreted as liminal interspaces in their own rights, which complicate narrative, embody false promises, but ultimately lead nowhere. In her reading of Nabokov's *Laughter in the Dark* (1938), Becci Dobbin highlights the author's close attention to domestic thresholds as crucial to the novel's sense of hesitation, ambiguity, and ambivalence. Despite the fact that Albinus, the novel's protagonist, seems to be conscious of the doors as harbingers of loss and deception, he rarely finds out what is behind them. Nevertheless, he spends much time wavering in suspension behind "literal and metaphorical closed doors," for the novel is less concerned with the consequences of crossing the threshold than with the doorway itself as a site of imaginative activity (Dobbin 29-30).

bright silvery mist. In another moment Alice was through the glass, and had jumped lightly down into the Looking-glass room (Carroll 142).

It is fitting to recall here Edith Turner's words, who described limen as an out-of-this-world place where the normal does not apply, much like Alice's looking-glass-world where animals and chessman speak (Ross xxx). In this sense, the looking glass is not just a threshold to alternative reality; a fluid surface which melts away to let Alice in. Instead, it expands until it has formed an autonomous zone where the *other* resides. Importantly, the trope of a (distorted) mirror-image has been applied to account for the representation of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union in the American imaginary. In my analysis of the American image of the European East in selected works of literature, I explore the metaphor's liminal potential to show that Eastern Europe is indeed a symbolic mirror in which American concerns and anxieties are reflected, but also an unreal world behind the looking glass, far removed from the familiar Western realities and thus potentially eye-opening and transformative.

On the level of language, Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton endow metaphor and metonymy with liminal attributes, as both tropes straddle two distinct systems (tenor and vehicle) to produce a third object which is richer than either of them separately (70). An excellent example of liminal discourse is the writing practiced by Gloria Anzaldúa. In addition to creating a hybrid textual space populated by different forms of written expression, she moves between English and Spanish to express the quality of cultural in-betweenness which cannot be conveyed in just one language.

Though liminal dynamics is often explored in relation to those genres and modes of writing which disrupt the center/margin dichotomy, Victor Turner's processional model in which the betwixt and between nature of the liminal phase is requisite for subsequent re-integration is also applied to study liminal tensions within the canonical.

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A good example of this is a critical essay by R.J. Ellis, which examines Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850) through a liminal lens. Hester is removed from the structure of Boston society and relegated to the edge of the community where she lives with her illegitimate daughter Pearl in a "separate, particularly intimate, socially reduced and primitively emotional relationship," which Ellis identifies with Turner's concept of communitas (37). Therefore, Hester's marginal position is at once liberating (living on the limen of the social structure grants her certain freedom and choice) and confining, as she is seen to be polluting and dangerous and thus must be kept away from the Bostonian community. Not only does the plot of the novel lend itself to liminal analysis, but also the figure of Hester illustrates how the concept can be used to study literary characters as liminal personae. By being positioned on the margin of the society, Hester is granted an intermediary status between both worlds: civilization and nature. In consequence, Hester's in-betweenness distinguishes her from the rest of Bostonians, ultimately turning her into a confidante to whom local women turn for advice and comfort. Hester's ambiguous position seems to be reinforced by her gender; several scholars suggested that female characters are sometimes represented as liminal beings wavering between culture and nature, or order and chaos respectively, while always remaining closer to the latter.[23]

Genres considered as liminal often feature characters that resemble Victor Turner's transitional beings, operating on the threshold of two worlds: real and imaginary; high and low; animal and human, to name but a few. However, as I have shown above, liminal personae may manifest themselves in a variety of literary contexts, assuming diverse outward forms and performing a number of roles. Manuel Aguirre borrows the linguistic term "inflection" to describe their inherent duality. The

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[23] Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton offer a comprehensive cultural analysis of a woman figure as a liminal symbol, drawing on female representations in myths and folktales, among others, in *Margins and Thresholds: An Enquiry into the Concept of Liminality in Text Studies* (2000).

traditional hero, a category which to Aguirre encompasses such diverse figures as Beowulf, Odysseus or Jesus Christ, is an "inflected" persona "associated with two different orders, and therefore prone to display contrary (or complementary) traits or to exhibit contrasting behaviors; he belongs to both worlds, or to neither, and he acts as an intermediary or as an agent of change (often for both sides)" ("Austin's Cat" 18). Turner himself recognized manifestations of liminality in the figure of the court jester; a common presence at European royal courts, though certainly not restricted solely to Europe, represented in numerous works of art and literature. Suffice it to recall "fools" from William Shakespeare's plays to comprehend the importance of the jester as a link between the inaccessible world of monarchy and the lowly royal subjects. Frequently, a court jester was one of very few people who could speak frankly to a monarch without fear of punishment. Protected by a guise of a harmless fool, he exposed vice and hypocrisy representing "the moral values of communitas as against the coercive power of supreme political rulers" (Turner, *The Ritual* 110). In a truly liminal fashion, court jesters operated on the threshold of the two universes, bridging the gap with their jokes and antics while still having the ear of the monarch.[24] Similar contradictory characteristics are displayed by "holy beggars," "third sons," "little tailors," or "simpletons" who are traditionally associated with myths, legends and folktales. Paradoxically, these seemingly marginal figures steal the limelight from other characters as they "strip off the pretensions of holders of high rank and office and

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[24] A notable example of a liminal jester comes from Polish culture. Stańczyk (c.1480-1560) went down in history as a token of sharp wit and political insight clothed in a grotesque buffoon's attire. The jester is present in several works of literature (among them short poems by the most prominent Polish Renaissance author, Jan Kochanowski) but his best-known image comes from Jan Matejko's canvas showing solemn Stańczyk sitting alone in a dark room, while a royal ball is in full swing in the neighbouring hall. The jester's morose appearance contrasts strikingly with his merry clothing and the brightly-lit ballroom. On the table next to him lies the reason for this unlikely representation; a letter stating that Poland has lost Smolensk to the Grand Duchy of Muscovy. The painting poignantly shows the jester as a transgressive liminar smoothly gliding between the carnivalesque and the political. Importantly, Stańczyk was brought back to life in the nineteenth-century literature, following Poland's partitions, as a potent symbol of patriotism informed by a skeptical political wisdom (Kopaliński 1101).

reduce them to the level of common humanity and mortality" (Turner, "Liminality" 110). Turner identifies their incarnations within European and American cultural circles in the Jewish fiddler from Chekhov's tale "Rothschild's Fiddle" (1894), Mark Twain's runaway slave Jim in *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), and Sonya, the prostitute from Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1866), among others.

As signalized earlier in this chapter, an archetypal liminal figure is the trickster, which is characterized by its in-between nature and capacity to disrupt hierarchies— despite being an apparently weak and lowly creature it is capable of outwitting oppressors by means of its guile and mischievousness. Tricksters play an important role in mythology and folklore of Native American, African, and African-American cultures and their ambiguous status is manifested in a variety of outer forms (Nicholas 9).[25] Outwardly humorous, trickster tales embody sober commentary on social inequalities and harsh living conditions, while the trickster's "most common role is to upset dominant orders, reshaping hostile physical and social environments to make them more habitable for humanity" (Salinas 143).[26] Ethnicity is also central to the study of the mulatto/a figure as a liminal persona wavering between two worlds, two communities, and two lifestyles.[27] In the context of literature, Hazel V. Carby, a leading scholar in African-American studies, proposes to see the figure of the mulatto as "a narrative

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[25] In Native American tales, trickster is usually represented as a non-human creature, e.g. a hare, a spider, or a coyote. However, it can also be a chief or even a demigod. An African trickster may be a human, an animal, or a divine being. The best-known trickster from the African-American cultural circle is Br'er Rabbit, the figure which is associated with slave narratives.

[26] For some dominant strands within contemporary trickster scholarship, please consult Chema Salinas's recent article, "Ambiguous Trickster Liminality: Two Anti-Mythological Ideas" (2013) where the relationship between trickster and liminality is also explored.

[27] Following W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of double consciousness, mulatto may be seen as embodying two seemingly irreconcilable identities, which leads to a sort of "double life" with separate thoughts, duties and ideals corresponding to each of the selves (Gallego 30). Mulattos' liminality unfolds in their struggle to attain the "third self" in which double consciousness may be reconciled without sacrificing either of its components, while simultaneously remaining in the liminal zone "precisely because their intrinsic duality renders a reconciliation of the two poles impossible" (Gallego 31).

device of mediation," which acts as a vehicle for exploring the relationship between races but also engendering the relationship between them (89).

From the point of view of this dissertation, the American characters' Eastern European origins promise to offer such middle ground of understanding, while at the same time engendering tensions resultant from cultural and outlook differences that each national identity entails. Therefore, I recognize certain liminal attributes in John Updike's Henry Bech, whose hyphenated Jewish-American perspective is reflected in his perceptions of the European East. In this sense, Bech's ethnicity disrupts the dominant logic of Soviet-American adversity, fostering a representation which entertains cultural affinity instead. In addition, I interpret the figure of the cultural ambassador, as represented and subverted by Bech, in terms of an in-between condition aimed at mediating and negotiating intercultural spaces. Also Philip Roth's mission of introducing the American public to Eastern European literature may be classified as an instance of cultural mediation in which literature becomes a site of encounter between cultures and traditions.

As mentioned earlier in this section, liminality is rarely limited to only one level of literary analysis, since liminal attributes "are seen (…) to bear the capacity to mutate endlessly across textual worlds" (Soto, Introduction 10). Therefore, liminality tends to recur in varied aspects of text, such as plot, structure or, as shown above, characters. Additionally, manifestations of liminality may overlap and interpenetrate one another, as is the case of African-American trickster tales which not only feature liminal characters but also embody cultural hybridity. Employed as a conceptual framework for textual analysis, liminality exhibits different degrees of adherence to the original concept developed by van Gennep and elaborated by Turner. There are cases where the "traditional" spatial pattern devised by Turner is applied in textual analysis, as

evidenced in Ellis's discussion of liminality in *The Scarlet Letter*. Also those studies which focus on liminality embodied by literary characters tend to be firmly embedded in Turner's notion of threshold beings. Sometimes, however, the only tangible trace of the anthropologist's scholarship seems to be the idea of limen as the realm of the uncertain and the transitory. As one critic observed, the lure of the limen lies in the infinite possibilities it offers and its ability to "shape the narrative into a structure of desire" (Mukherji, Introduction xvii). Therefore, it comes as little surprise that so many scholars pay close attention to inter-spaces and their implications in literature.

The present discussion of the uses of liminality is by no means comprehensive. It falls beyond the scope of this project to list all possible applications of liminality in literature. Nevertheless, it hopefully accounts for the concept's considerable visibility in literary studies and gives us a taste of how the original model is being re-configured to account for different genres and aspects of texts. While some of the specific uses explored above have little or no bearing on my analysis of the American literary image of Eastern Europe, I too take advantage of the concept's versatility to show how the liminal operates in more than one way in selected works of literature. In this connection, the following section offers some insights into how liminality is being used to illuminate the notions of space and travel, which are central to my argument.

1.4. Liminal Space and Travel

In *The Rites of Passage*, Arnold van Gennep proposes that a territorial passage may function as a framework for discussing rites of passage. The act of crossing the frontier between one place and another is often accompanied by different formalities: political, legal, and economic, but also magico-religious. In the past, when countries

were not adjacent to one another like today, territorial passage often implied moving through the so-called neutral zone, i.e. a place lying in-between two sacred territories. According to van Gennep, the neutral zone corresponds to "the symbolic and spatial area of transition," where the subject is suspended both physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a period of time, wavering between two worlds (18). Similarly, when discussing Ndembu rituals, Victor Turner observed that neophytes are often forced to temporarily leave the tribe and spend a designated amount of time in a special, usually secluded place. Therefore, it follows that both the act of traveling as well as certain spaces may exhibit liminal attributes.

Recent scholarship in liminality highlights the concept's potential to study travel and space in terms of transitory experience which provides a temporary way out of the structured normality of everyday life. It is especially relevant in the context of the democratization of travel which took place in the early twentieth century, when the automobile and then air travel revolutionized communication, granting mobility to an increasing number of people. Turner himself recognized a liminal world in Jack Kerouac's novel *On the Road* (1957) which celebrates life as an unending passage from one place to another. In a recent film adaptation of the book (2012), when a stranger asks Sal Paradise, the novel's narrator, if he is going somewhere or just going for the sake of it, Sal opts for the latter. The "just going" attitude encapsulates Sal's desire to live life as a continuous experience, focusing on the road he is traveling rather than the journey's aim. Nowadays, it is particularly air travel that seems to offer a liminal experience of being "betwixt and between" two places, suspended in a nameless transitory zone for the duration of the journey. Salman Rushdie explores the liminal potential of air travel in several of his novels, but perhaps the most interesting description of the experience comes from *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), where the

narrator equates flying with submerging himself in an alternative reality: "You will see that I had entered an unfamiliar state of mind. The place, language, people and custom I knew had all been removed from me by the simple act of boarding this flying vehicle; and these, for most of us, are the four anchors of the soul" (383).[28] Thus, the act of flying may be a liberating experience during which familiar structures are suspended and the ties binding one to the ground are temporarily dissolved. At the same time, the unsettling nature of the Moore's plane journey points to the elements of risk and danger that air travel may entail. In this dissertation, air travel as a liminal space and time full of potentiality is explored in relation to John Updike's short story, "Rich in Russia," where the act of flying onboard a Russian plane sets off a series of recollections which, symbolically, transport the protagonist into his long-forgotten past.

If air travel is read in terms of liminal experience that does away with earth-bound norms and opens up possibilities of new configurations (at least in fiction), then airport is, by extension, a space marked by analogous in-betweenness. While neither the airplane nor the airport may be labeled "no-man's land," since both realms are governed by strict legal and security regulations, they function as transition spaces where ordinary life is put on hold in anticipation of a novel or at least different experience traveling implies. Mark Gottdiener has pinpointed the liminal quality of both spaces:

Literally acting as the conduit from one physical location on the planet to another, they [airports] facilitate the shrinkage of the globe and transcend both space and time. They also effect a change in existential status from people being immersed in the complex role of everyday life to that of being a traveller, of someone escaping not only the bonds of earth but of daily existence as well. Trips by air are exciting because they promise a change (…). Even people

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[28] An interesting analysis of Rushdie's use of air travel as a liminal phase full of transformative potential can be found in Ursula Kluwick's "The Wonders and Perils of Air: Crossing Magic Realities in Salman Rushdie's Fiction" (2005).

journeying by air on business can indulge in the fantasy of tourism. Travel is

always an adventure, always an encounter with the "new" (11).

Gottdiener mentions several important aspects which make airport space and air travel liminal. First of all, space and time are perceived differently than in daily life. However, it is not only a matter of covering vast expanses of land in short time, or what he calls "the shrinkage of the globe," but also the way time is spent in airport space. Airport architecture "promotes" unproductive, leisurely, and consumerist activities, luring modern liminars with cafés, shopping areas, gambling sites, or even spa facilities. In this sense, the airport has become a threshold area to a distinctive experience of travel; a prelude or an extension of the extra-ordinary reality of moving away from home. Thus, airport shopping/dining/gambling/pampering is *legitimized* by the inclusive framework of travel experience, understood as liberty from life constraints and the realm of possibility. This positively hedonistic and escapist quality of airport and hence travel is offset by some more disturbing examples of airport in-betweenness. Gottdiener mentions what might be called voluntary airport homelessness: an emotional mechanism which makes certain people deliberately miss their flights in order to stay in the liminal zone of the airport (12). A variation of the theme is explored in Steven Spielberg's *Terminal Man* from 2004. The movie is said to be inspired by the story of a world-famous airport dweller, Mehran Karimi Nasseri who spent eighteen years at Terminal 1 of Charles de Gaulle Airport in Paris. Unable either to leave or go back due to complex personal and political circumstances involving, among others, passport and documentation loss, he was allowed to remain at the territorial crossroads the airport provided. More recently, a former CIA agent Edward Snowden had spent forty days at Moscow's Sheremetyevo airport before he was granted asylum in Russia. The airport's "neutral zone" allowed him to avoid American persecution for disclosing National

Security Agency documents to the press. Similarly, in John Updike's "Bech in Rumania," discussed in this dissertation, airport space provides a neutral zone of anonymity which the protagonist Henry Bech takes advantage of in order to briefly mislead American embassy people eager to exploit him to achieve their political goals.

Speaking about tourism, some scholars recognize affinities between modern travel experience and religious journey. Indeed, in his wide-ranging studies on culture, Victor Turner devoted much attention to religious pilgrimage and the relationship between its antistructural and liberating nature and the liminal period in rites of passage (*Image* xiii). Pilgrimage is very much a matter of crossing the threshold between the familiar and the unconventional with the aim of embarking on a journey permeated with potentiality and the feeling of "what may be." In this sense, modern tourism can be said to function as an equivalent of traditional religious festivals and journeys, as it counterpoints the normality and ordinariness of daily life and offers a promise of personal growth and transition (Sharpley and Sundaram 162).[29] The idea of transatlantic travel as a journey of (self) discovery is particularly significant in the context of the present dissertation. By traveling to Eastern European capitals, the American characters analyzed here come into contact with alternative sociopolitical realities which, in turn, trigger reflection or some kind of inner change. Although these journeys, and particularly those made before 1989, do not fall into the category of tourism understood in terms of liminal leisure, they nonetheless carry an antistructural or transgressive

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[29] Such an approach to tourism is explored in Elizabeth Gilbert's memoir *Eat, Pray, Love: One Woman's Search for Everything across Italy, India and Indonesia* (2006), which tells a story of a thirty-something divorcee who abandons her American life to embark on a year-long-journey of discovery. During the liminal time and space of travel, Elizabeth learns to enjoy life pleasures (Italy), unearths her inner spirituality (India), and achieves balance between the two through a fulfilling romantic relationship (Indonesia). Despite the book's staggering success, with several million copies sold and a Hollywood film adaptation in tow, a number of reviewers criticized its consumerist slant. While international travel may indeed function as a transitory experience which brings fulfillment, love and enlightenment, it remains reserved only for those who have the financial means to afford it. Liminal potential of travel is commodified and therefore loses much of its spontaneous antistructural character that Turner originally envisaged.

element, given the fact that, through their privileged Western status, the travelers do not abide by the same rules as the locals. At the same time, some of these journeys are *structured* by the framework of cultural diplomacy—as is the case in John Updike's and Joyce Carol Oates's short stories.

Hazel Andrews and Les Roberts observe that many works concerned with tourism as a liminal phenomenon foreground the elements of "the ludic, consumption, carnivalesque, deterritorialisation, and the inversion or suspension of normative and social structures of everyday life" (Introduction 6). While these aspects are relevant to the discussion of liminality in mobility studies, the scholars feel that equal attention should be given to counter-ideas, such as social control, terror, surveillance, etc., in order to analyze space not only as a site of pleasure but also of danger (Introduction 6). Accordingly, the collection of essays, *Liminal Landscapes: Travel, Experience and Spaces In-between* (2012) explores contradictions and ongoing tensions which in-between spaces embody, in an attempt to avoid relegating liminality exclusively to the domain of the playful and the liberating. To give an example, the beach is conceptualized as a space which invites associations with the transgressive and the carnivalesque, but which may also house "different kinds of power relations and ideas of surveillance" (Andrews and Roberts, Introduction 4). The authors propose to view certain English coastal areas along such contradictory qualities, linking them with the problems of displacement, illegal migration, transnational labor, racial tensions, and even death.[30] Therefore, spaces are liminal not just because they lie in between two,

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[30] While the beach holds strong connotations of relax and pleasure; in the UK it has been central to the development of tourism (Meethan 70), it may also occasion fear, danger, and the condition of isolation. Thus, as Andrews and Roberts observe, the tragic death of Chinese migrant workers, who drowned while picking cockles at the Morecambe Bay beach in 2004, alters common understanding of a coastal resort as "as site of tourism, leisure, pleasure, and consumption (Introduction 6), casting it instead as a treacherous, secluded zone of insecure migrant work. In a similar vein, Pietro Deandrea juxtaposes the bucolic image of English countryside, "the-wished for paradise," with the harsh reality of migrant lives, as negotiated through contemporary fiction: "(…) this contrast revolves around traditional tourist sites or cultural attractions, be they pastoral or cultural or both, turned by the phenomenon of new

often opposing, systems, but also because they embody multiple contradictions and thus resist categorization. Liminal space and time may be named, described and analyzed, but it seems that something is always lost in translation, or we should perhaps say—in *transit*.

The relationship between travel, space and liminality comes to the fore also in a recent essay collection, *Women in Transit Through Literary Liminal Spaces* (2013), where the concept is used as a functional tool to examine "a wide range of spaces and experiences of transit that expose the negotiations of women's 'proper' place" (Gómez Reus and Gifford 3). Here, female engagement with space transcends a traditional private-public dichotomy to center instead on women's passage through in-between zones, such as the railway-station, the wilderness, or even the ambulance at the First World War frontline. Therefore, the study of *gendered* liminal spaces reveals the role of mobility in shaping new forms of identity as well as catalyzing social agency and recognition (4-6).

The paradoxical nature of liminal spaces and liminality as such is pivotal to my understanding of Eastern Europe in this dissertation. As the following chapter will show, Eastern Europe is hardly just a geographical notion, indicating the region's location on the map of Europe. Eastern Europe is also a Cold-War geopolitical construct synonymous with the so-called Eastern Bloc, that is, a group of communist European states outside the Soviet Union. Most importantly, however, Eastern Europe is also an idea, a mental rubric, and a representation. In this sense, it emerges as a complex liminal space which does not belong to the West but cannot be equated with the Soviet Union either; a space which disrupts Cold-War polarities by straddling different political and cultural narratives and representations. As the analytical chapters will hopefully show,

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slaveries into liminal zones where exploitation is the order of the day, and potentially dotting every part of the UK" (221).

Eastern Europe is also highly malleable. To put it differently, American perceptions of Eastern Europe are contingent upon a variety of concerns, both personal and collective (national), which shape the imagined space into a narrative which, though seemingly aimed at foregrounding the foreign other, does in fact reflect the characters' wide-ranging preoccupations at the time. In the context of this dissertation, Eastern Europe's liminal nature is further reinforced by the character of the works under analysis, all of which had been inspired by actual journeys to the East. Not only did the authors visit Eastern Europe, but also their narrators and protagonists are in transit; removed from their well-structured world and immersed in the liminal situation of travel behind the Iron Curtain; a boundary which is solid and porous at once.

Looking at some examples of in-between spaces presented in this chapter and their relationship with the problems of migration and racial discrimination, a question arises about the political dimension of liminality. Although Victor Turner recognized the subversive and antistructural nature of liminal situations and their capacity to subvert the existing order, he did not take the argument much further. However, recent contributions to the field suggest that liminality may be indeed discussed in political terms—a view which is also entertained in the present dissertation. For instance, Jon Piccini convincingly argues that trans-continental journeys made by Australian activists in the sixties facilitated transmission of political ideas and practices, "resuscitating travel as a thoroughly historical (and hence political category)" (2). Drawing on Turner's ideas, the scholar conceptualizes the Australian movement "across seemingly impassable borders of Cold War" as a liminal moment in its own right, complete with the experience of spontaneous communitas regardless of language barriers, but also a way of exchanging ideas and developing political awareness on the part of both travelers and locals (17-18). Along similar lines, in this work I explore the political

dimension of transatlantic travel in relation to American cultural diplomacy and its goals.

A prominent example of a liminal threshold endowed with a heavy political meaning is the Berlin Wall. Erected in 1961, it partitioned the city of Berlin, and by extension the whole country, into two binary zones: democratic and communist. Far more than a mere physical threshold, the Wall came to embody the idea of Iron Curtain separating Soviet-dominated countries from the world at large. Thinking in liminal terms, the act of climbing the Berlin Wall from the Eastern side was burdened with considerable uncertainty; success meant new possibilities, while failure could even bring death. Eighteen-year-old Peter Fechter was one of many East Berliners who died in an attempt to escape to the Western side. His death caused international outrage and became a symbol of the Soviet Union's brutal politics and the danger inherent in divisive political boundaries. The case of the Berlin Wall as a liminal space will be examined in detail in chapter 4 in relation to Joyce Carol Oates's short stories: "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" and "Our Wall."

In connection with the political dimension of liminality, I wish to end the present discussion by bringing up a scholar whose work in social and political theory both follows and challenges Victor Turner's theory. Out of many uses of liminality discussed here, the sociologist Arpad Szakolczai's is the most far-reaching, as it strives to analyze "whole societies going through a crisis or a 'collapse of order'" (Thomassen, "The Uses" 19).

1.5. Liminal Modernity

Szakolczai believes that it is essential to extend the meaning of liminality beyond the middle stage in the rite of passage, and instead interpret it as a concept in its own right "without losing conceptual vigor and precision" (*Reflexive* 210). Liminality may help to study and analyze situations in which customary order is dissolved but which, at the same time, are formative in terms of institutions and structures. The scholar asserts the concept's significance for such disciplines as philosophy and social theory, and its validity as an ordering tool in grasping some of the most problematic facets of modernity. During a considerable amount of time liminality had been associated with the 1960s hippy celebration of anti-structure and difference which led to the neglect of the risky and dangerous aspects of transition periods. Therefore, it is necessary to broaden the understanding and application of the concept—a view which is also shared by Thomassen, and, with respect to space and mobility, by Andrews and Roberts.

When it comes to social science, Szakolczai places liminality next to such key concepts as structure, order, and institution. Liminality provides an alternative to the traditional binary system based on oppositions between order and disorder, and structured and unstructured situations, offering instead a tripartite processual model in which the middle type "could be distinguished both from a regular normal state of order and from the total lack of structure and order that the conceptual opposites of order such as chaos and disorder usually imply, in a temporary, suspended, transitory, in-between situation" (*Reflexive* 210). In order to liberate liminality from the narrow context of rituals, two important changes must be introduced. Understood as the middle stage in a rite of passage, liminality is a temporal, transitory stage followed by re-aggregation or

re-incorporation of the subject into the well-established order, albeit equipped with freshly acquired knowledge and abilities. In the real-life large-scale liminality, it is hardly possible to return to the well-structured order of things since it no longer exists. Thus, searching for a new order becomes the central task of a modern liminal experience. Secondly, those undergoing a liminal stage of a rite of passage are usually accompanied by special guardians or masters of ceremony, who act as guides during this ambiguous and uncertain time, and can keep such rituals under control. Yet, the collapse of order, which is characteristic of real-life liminality, undermines the authority of any individual who could take on such a role. The result is a *liminal crisis*, a condition without any prospects of improvement; that is returning to pre-liminal normality. Moreover, it is essentially a frightening and dangerous situation which, owing to "the dissolution of all stable frameworks" and the absence of guardians, may lead to the escalation of violence (*Reflexive* 210). By extending liminality beyond a temporal, transitory stage or period, Szakolczai develops the notion of *permanent liminality*: "Thus, one may argue that the effective long-term solution to large-scale real-world liminal situations is to make such liminal conditions permanent. This would insulate social 'order,' in a paradoxical but apparently effective way, against further possibilities of a liminal crisis" (*Reflexive* 211). Given that temporality and finality are some of the fundamental qualities of the concept, the scholar's proposition may seem paradoxical at first. However, a close reading of Turner proves that Szakolczai's interpretation is not unfounded.[31] In *The Ritual Process*, Turner observes that due to modern specialization of society combined with complex social division of labor, "what

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[31] Drawing on the life and teachings of Saint Francis of Assisi, Turner observes that through his own example the saint wished to compel other friars to "inhabit the fringes and interstices of the social structure of his time, and to keep them in a *permanently liminal state*," which is the optimal condition for communitas to thrive (*The Ritual* 145, my emphasis). Although, the notion of permanent liminality is not elaborated further in the volume, Turner signalizes that the condition of in-betweenness and transitoriness is not necessarily finite.

was in tribal society principally a set of transitional qualities 'betwixt and between' defined states of cultures has evolved into 'an institutionalized state'" (107). For Turner, transition as a permanent condition is exemplified by monastic and mendicant states in world religions. Therefore, it is not surprising that among three situations of real-life permanent liminality developed by Szakolczai there is also the one suggested by Turner himself: monasticism. The three situations correspond to the tripartite sequence of a rite of passage conceived by van Gennep: separation, transition, and re-aggregation. Permanentization occurs when "any of the phases in this sequence becomes frozen, as if a film stopped at a particular frame" (*Reflexive* 212). In other words, if the film is stopped in the first phase, i.e. separation, an individual or a group become "trapped" in an endless repetition of rites of separation. The above-mentioned monasticism is an example of permanentization of the separation phase.[32] To explain the second type of permanentization, Szakolczai also resorts to Turner. This time, he draws from the anthropologist's interest in performance and his argument that there is an analogy between theater and rituals. If rituals are interpreted in terms of drama, then the middle phase becomes the actual performance or the "staging of a ritual" (*Reflexive* 213). A salient example used by the scholar to illustrate the permanentization of the second phase is the court society, where "actors" are stuck in an endless performance of ceremonies.[33] Finally, the third instance of permanent liminality occurs when the last phase of a rite of passage is prolonged *ad infinitum*, like in the Soviet-type Bolshevism. Importantly for this dissertation, Szakolczai argues that communist takeovers in Europe and Asia were greatly facilitated by the end of World War II and the liminal situation it

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[32] It involves an ascetic, orderly and arbitrarily regulated existence under the guidance of supervisors, which implies, among others, regular deprivations of basic necessities, such as shelter, food or clothing, as well as the complete abstention from sexual activity.

[33] Indeed, Queen Elizabeth is said to have remarked that "We princes (…) are set as it were upon stages in the sight and view of the world" (qtd. in Burke 32). The critic Peter Burke examines the court of the French king Louis XIV in terms of a theater where both the emperor and his retinue are caught in an endless repetition of rituals and performances which, taken together, constitute the unchanging essence of the court life.

provoked. Given the argument's importance for the present work, it is worth quoting here at some length:

> If all wars are liminal situations in which the cycle of mimetic violence escalates beyond measure, then the closing stages of a world war, and especially the process of reconstruction that starts after such massive warfare, can be conceived of as a rite of reaggregation. This is the moment to assess guilt and mete out punishment, but also to heal wounds, look towards the future and thus actively forget what has happened just recently. The singular specificity of communist regimes, however, was to play continuously on the sentiments of suffering, revenge and hatred, prevent the settling down of the negative emotions, stir up the worst in human feelings by submitting a population that had already suffered beyond measure in a world war first to an endless civil war and then to a period of forced and unintelligible terror. As has been recognized everywhere since 1989, but as was also experienced daily in the countries of then-existing socialism since 1948, communism was a regime in which the Second World War never ended (*Reflexive* 214-15).

By interpreting certain social phenomena through the lens of liminality, Szakolczai turns the concept into a methodological tool for understanding modernity. The scholar's interpretation of communism as an instance of permanent liminality, in which World War II never really came to a definite end, is a departure point for conceptualizing the condition of post-war Eastern Europe as liminal. The sociologist argues that the past experience of the region together with its particular geopolitical condition, and a heightened state of vulnerability following the experience of war, made it possible for communists to take over power and keep the entire society trapped in a permanent state of liminality, characterized by confusion, threat, and uncertainty. The above-mentioned

combination of factors is described by Szakolczai as "the long experience of transitoriness" ("In a Permanent State" 4). Furthermore, the liminal status of Eastern Europe was further reinforced by the region's intermediate position between two dominant forces: East and West. In other words, the establishment and maintenance of communism was a consequence of spatial and temporal liminality of the region, as expressed by its geopolitical in-betweeness and the prolonged situation of war.

Curiously, the notion of permanent liminality is also applied to the other principal "actor" of this dissertation—America. Szakolczai sees it as an example of permanent liminality par excellence: "It was a country created by those who made the 'great passage' through the ocean, thus severing themselves from their past and traditions, and it was further built on the experience of the 'frontier' moving always further to the West" (*Reflexive* 215). In Szakolczai's critical assessment, reading "the American experiment" through the lens of permanent liminality "restores what is captivating in it without hiding away all that is outrageous and repulsive," helping to illuminate the nation's singular worldwide appeal (*Reflexive* 215).

By reiterating Szakolczai's argument I have hoped to foreground liminality as an ordering tool capable of illuminating phenomena which at once pertain to and surpass the scope of this dissertation. Though my work aims to study representations rather than sociohistorical realities, Szakolczai's suggestion that post-war Eastern Europe may be read in terms of a liminal space intimates the concept's potential to, if not grasp, than at least shed some light on Eastern Europe's ambiguous and malleable position, evidenced in internal and external conceptualizations of the area. Furthermore, the idea of permanent liminality will be used in relation to recurring Western representations of Eastern Europe as suspended between past and present; infancy and maturity; East and West. As for America's liminality, I touch upon it in the concluding remarks of chapter

3, yet my argument is framed specifically by the question of ethnicity, that is cross-cultural passages between the U.S. and Eastern Europe made by the Jewish-American author Henry Bech in John Updike's short stories.

1.6. Conclusions: Strengths and Limitations of Liminality

The aim of this discussion has been to explain the origins of the notion of liminality, as well as to account for different ways in which it has been employed. Although considerable attention is devoted to anthropology and performance studies as disciplines which have been most influenced by the concept, the chapter has focused on fields which, to a greater or lesser degree, frame the present dissertation: cultural studies, literature understood as a specific product of culture, spaces and travel, and finally politics and history. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, there is no single guide to liminality that would offer a comprehensive overview of the concept or instruct the reader how it should or should not be used. Basic knowledge about liminality and related notions comes from Arnold van Gennep's and Victor Turner's works, but due attention must also be paid to the concept's travels beyond anthropology and the way they modified and enriched the original idea. That said my own discussion does not provide a thorough study of liminality since I have focused only on some areas of application, consciously neglecting disciplines which have successfully adopted the concept but which are not pertinent to the present discussion. Notwithstanding, I hope to have accounted for liminality's wide-ranging uses in contemporary scholarship, as well as elucidated the concept's principal attributes.

Although some scholars find Turner's division into liminal and liminoid useful, much research on liminality does away with this distinction. Similarly, from the

instances studied here it emerges that liminal experience is characterized by transformative potential, open-endedness and a strong likelihood of new configurations to arise, but it does not necessarily entail transformation. While I believe that these changes have enriched and enhanced the concept's critical potential, as evidenced in this chapter, it is crucial not to compromise the cogency of liminality by using it as a "blanket term." In the weak sense of the word, almost anything that lies in between two systems can be termed as liminal, and the ubiquity of things, places and people *liminal* not only seems intellectually problematic but may also undermine the concept's validity as a methodological tool. At the same time, the pervasive use of liminality can also suggest that we are dealing with something of a universal category or even an *archetype* (Soto, Introduction 15). This view seems to be entertained by Szakolczai, who places liminality next to such key categories as structure, order and institution in his far-reaching study of modernity. Similarly, Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton propose that the liminal may be "one fundamental category of the human universe to be studied with at least as much care as the canonical—especially in the light of such contemporary theoretical positions as Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction, new Historicism, Postmodernism" (72). On the other hand, Thomassen argues that the notion of liminoid "allowed for quite indiscriminate application of liminality" and thus it is advisable to "return to the starting point of van Gennep" and see liminality in relation to *transition* and the way it "shape[s] both persons and communities" ("Revisiting" 28).

Personally, I concur with Isabel Soto's view that liminality does not have to be construed as a universal category or an archetype in order to function as a useful tool of analysis and explication (Introduction 16). Moreover, I am of the opinion that liminality as a functional category and a *metaphor* may be productively combined with other theoretical frameworks. Liminality's interdisciplinary potential, already recognized by

van Gennep and proved by Turner, is perhaps its greatest asset not only in the narrow context of the present work, but also in academic scholarship at large. Accordingly, in the subsequent chapter I will introduce premises and methods stipulated by imagology, with the aim of constructing a meaningful set of tools that would facilitate the project of analyzing literary representations of post-war Eastern Europe in selected American works of literature.

2. Imagology. Mapping the Idea of Eastern Europe

This chapter aims to introduce the area of research whose concerns and methods form the backbone of the present dissertation. I start by outlining the tradition of constructing national representations prior to the establishment of imagology proper in the second half of the twentieth century. Then, in section 2.2., I discuss methodological guidelines underpinning image studies, in order to foreground the tools and concepts which I will later use to examine selected textual material. In this connection, I also engage with Edward Said's seminal study of Orientalist discourse, paying particular attention to the notion of *imaginative geographies*. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to the idea and representation of Eastern Europe. Drawing on Larry Wolff's study, I inquire into the ontological status of Eastern Europe by exploring designations, narratives, and discourses which fuel this broad and malleable rubric. Given the time frame of this dissertation, I also trace the sociopolitical and conceptual "making" of the region, laying special emphasis on the nature of cultural life under communism. The last two sections are meant to complement each other. First, I take a closer look at cultural contacts between the U.S. and Eastern Europe with the aim of comprehending Western interest in Eastern Europe and the reasons which led American authors to visit and narrate the region. Finally, I offer a brief imagological sketch of some prior representations of the region in American literature.

2.1. The Tradition of Constructing Otherness

The process of constructing mental representations of other peoples, regions, or countries based on valorizations resulting from the interpretation of images rather than

objective criteria has long been the object of scholarly interest. Within Comparative Literary Studies, the specialism concerned with analyzing mental images of others and of ourselves is known as *imagology*. Although it is a relatively young field whose emergence dates back to the mid-twentieth century, the practice of assigning particular characteristics or even characters to different races and societies is by no means new (Leerssen, "Imagology" 17). In the European tradition, images of self and other are already present in ancient Greek literature (Beller, "Perception" 6). Schematized representations of national groups can be found in the writings of Aeschylus, Herodotus, or Tacitus. In fact, it is thought that European representations of foreign cultures are indebted to the patterns developed in ancient Greece (Nippel 33). Particularly, Herodotus of Halicarnassus emerges not only as a "father of history," but also as a pioneer of representing alterity in textual form. In his account of Greco-Persian Wars, Herodotus writes about foreign religious and cultural practices, which he strives to present objectively in accordance with the idea that customs embody the values of a given society. At the same time, however, the historian's choice of cultural differences is clearly dictated by his own standards of "normality."[34]

In the Middle Ages, national representations assumed the form of the so-called *origo* stories which traced the bloodline of a people and recounted their arrival and settlement in a given land. Medieval communities were imagined as large families sharing not only common origins but also moral values. The biblical book of *Genesis* explained the number of peoples and their distribution on earth by identifying Noah's three sons with three known continents: Europe, Asia and Africa (Hoppenbrouwers 46).

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[34] Moreover, Herodotus's perception of other cultures is shaped by certain influential concepts of the time—like the so-called theory of climate—which links cultural and temperamental variations among societies with climate differences. The relationship between human character and climate is famously explored by Hippocrates who singles out Ionia as the most desirable location due to its mild and agreeable climate. The region's favorable climatic conditions are regarded as crucial for the general well-being of its inhabitants, who are credited with bodily strength, good health, and handsome appearance (Beller, "Climate" 299).

Similarly, biblical *Exodus* and the Trojan origo, borrowed from Roman history, offered a productive source of medieval national myths. The question of descent could either unify or divide ethnic communities in the Middle Ages. Those sharing common roots were perceived in terms of close kin relations or brotherhoods. Accordingly, the thirteenth-century legend about three brothers, Lech, Czech, and Rus, who founded the nations of Poland, Bohemia and Ruthenia, respectively, is not just a narrative of each nation's origins, but also a model of ethnic fraternity shared by these three Slavic peoples.

The medieval perception of alterity was inextricably linked to the ruling religion. Non-Christian peoples were approached with distrust and contempt and frequently imagined in scathingly negative terms. Muslims and Jews, the most loathed enemies of the Christians, were reviled to the point of dehumanization; the first being likened to dogs, whereas the latter to pigs—which are regarded as taboo animals in both Judaism and Islam. Where the religious criterion could not be applied, Christian others were perceived through the lens of their outstanding habits, marked physical features, and odd psychic qualities (Hoppenbrouwers 57).[35] Even though from the thirteenth century onward the standards of ethnographic observation had improved, which in turn resulted in more objective and truthful accounts of other peoples, the tradition of blending fact and fiction in depicting foreigners remained alive well into the next centuries (Hoppenbrouwers 61). In more general terms, ethnic stereotyping in the Middle Ages was not only a form of domesticating the other, but it also contributed to the project of self-definition and, in turn, consolidating collective identity.

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[35] As for the unknown others inhabiting mysterious lands beyond the Christian world, their humanity was questioned and their physical traits were represented in terms of monstrosity The so-called Plinian races, named after Pliny the Elder whose extensive work on unusual men was widely diffused in the Middle Ages, held a powerful psychological appeal on medieval people, combining "fantasy, escapism, delight in the exercise of the imagination, and—very important—fear of the unknown" (J. B. Friedman 24).

In his seminal publication, *Imagined Communities*: *Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983) Benedict Anderson links the origins of national consciousness with Europe's development toward modernity. Particularly the spread of vernaculars and the rise of print culture "made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate to themselves, in profoundly new ways" (Anderson 36). As the geopolitical landscape of Europe was becoming increasingly structured, national differences began to shape "into recognizable fixed patterns" (Leerssen, "The Poetics" 64). The Renaissance urge to classify and systematize found its expression in Julius Caesar Scaliger's *Poetics Libri VII* (1561) which methodically categorized nations according to their characters and attributes. Similar encyclopedic listings were to become very influential in the following century. Perhaps the best-known example of this tradition is the *Völkertafel* or the *Tableau of Nationalities* (ca. 1700) depicting male representatives of European nations, each wearing a national costume. The figures are followed with columns of text listing geographical, social, and moral traits of each nation (Leerssen, "The Poetics" 64).

In the eighteenth century, the study of national characters went hand in hand with political theories (Chew III 181). Montesquieu, one of the leading figures of the Age of Reason, placed strong emphasis on the relationship between national character and legislature. In turn, national character was closely related to weather conditions, in accordance with the ancient theory of climate advocated by Herodotus and Hippocrates: "If it be true that temper of the mind and the passion of the heart are extremely different in different climates, the laws ought to be in relation both to the variety of those passions and to the variety of those tempers" (Montesquieu 221). People living in cold climates are classified by the thinker as vigorous, courageous, and less susceptible to both physical pain and sensual pleasure. Conversely, Southern nations are said to

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display passivity, indolence, but also liveliness and sexual passion. Montesquieu's climatological determinism goes as far as to link national characters with specific governmental systems. Therefore, monarchy and authoritarian rules are fit for hot climates, while republics are considered to be more common in Northern nations (Leerssen, "The Poetics" 70). In broader terms, Baron de la Bréde distinguished between European liberty and Asiatic despotism, which, as the American historian Larry Wolff argues, "allowed for an intermediary cultural space, in which the idea of Eastern Europe evolved" (*Inventing* 7). In this sense, posits Wolff, the intellectual invention of Eastern Europe "was entangled with evolving Orientalism," that is a multifaceted project of cultural, ideological, and political mastery which Western Europe exercised over its Asiatic other (*Inventing* 7). Wolff's thesis on the eighteenth-century creation of the idea of Eastern Europe is of crucial importance and will be examined in detail later in this chapter.

The late eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century conception of nation is invariably discussed with reference to the scholarship of Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803). This German philosopher propagated the idea of *Volksgeist*, which should be interpreted as soul or spirit unique to each people (L. Johnson 143). According to Herder, this collective soul manifests itself in common language, but also shared tradition and folk culture. Irrespective of the gross misinterpretation which the Herderian model underwent in the twentieth century at the hands of Nazi ideology, the idea celebrated cultural diversity based on the belief that one nation's culture should not be judged against another since each has a singular character which makes it "stand out from humanity at large" (Leerssen, "The Poetics" 73). Nevertheless, Herder's insistence on Volksgeist as the defining feature of national identity led him to perceive ethnic communities in highly polarized terms. For instance, Slavs were regarded as peace-

loving and charitable people repelled by violence and aggression. The Germans, on the other hand, possessed a warlike disposition which made them, more than other peoples, contribute to "the weal and woe of this continent" (Herder qtd. in L. Johnson 132). These competing versions of Volksgeist helped to define the national identities of Poles, Czechs, and Hungarians, and "to interpret their histories as a continuous struggle for freedom and against foreign, and in particular German, hegemony" (L. Johnson 133). Furthermore, Herder's scholarship had a considerable impact on European Romanticism. Polish romantic writers, for instance, saw the nation's role in terms of *messianism*. Poland's fate was likened to the Passion of Christ; beaten, crucified and buried by the foreign partitioners, and the nation itself was perceived in terms of a universal symbol of oppression and struggle for freedom. Similarly, Bohemia's national history was interpreted in line with the German-Slav tensions envisaged by Herder. Czech historian and politician, František Palacký, explained the history of Bohemia as a constant struggle between "romanticized Slavs" and "expansionist Germandom" for the sake of retaining Slavic cultural identity (Mahoney 109).

The nineteenth-century essentialist understanding of national character in terms of innate collective identity had a deep resonance in the study of cultural production:

> All fields of culture were held to reflect an underlying nationality, and in many cases were meant to celebrate it—e.g. in patriotic verse, national historical novels or dramas, or in the genre of history painting. The determination of cultural activity by the nationality and by national character is such an all-pervasive doxa that it affects and permeates all of nineteenth-century culture and society (Leerssen, "The Poetics" 73).

Consequently, it comes as little surprise that the belief in culture as an expression of national character was translated into the study of literature. In 1863 Hippolyte Taine

proposed to understand a literary text through three interconnected parameters: *la race*, *le milieu*, and *le moment,* which have been rendered into English as "nation," "surroundings," and "epoch." According to Taine, the study of a cultural artifact is actually the study of a person behind it and must therefore take into account the author's national background, as well as the time and place in which it has been produced. In his insistence on the importance of nation and milieu, Taine invokes a long-standing tradition of climate theory, associating certain national traits with the physical environment in which one lives. It is noteworthy that Taine's understanding of nation as a collection of dispositions expressed both in temperament and bodily structure echoes the Herderian notion of collective spirit which is innate and unique to a given people. In a similar vein, nineteenth-century scholars invested the study of philology, with the concept of race, turning it into "a kind of master-discipline for theorizing about human origins in general and human races in particular" (Galt Harpham 43). Differences between Indo-European and Semitic languages were interpreted in terms of in-depth cultural discrepancies, which in turn influenced scientific racism. For instance, Comte de Gobineau used linguistic evidence to proclaim the supremacy of Aryan people as not only the purest but also the most masterly of races (Galt Harpham 45). Even though nineteenth-century scholars of languages like Max Müller or Ernest Renan can hardly be blamed for instigating racial ideology, their ideas were molded to fit the radical discourse of anti-Semitism and xenophobia, which eventually culminated in the dogma of Aryanism (Galt Harpham 45-50).

Joep Leerssen identifies the beginning of "proto-imagological" studies in Europe with the shift from the ethnically-deterministic approach to literature, such as the one favored by Taine, to a more voluntaristic view of national character as a product of "historically-variable choices and circumstances" ("Imagology" 20). This, however,

does not signify that the belief in the actual existence of national characters vanished from sight. In fact, essentialist perceptions of national traits prevailed well into the inter-war period. According to Leerssen, the emergence of imagology proper could only take place when scholars moved away from approaching national stereotypes as explanatory models of behavior. Arguably, German enslavement of drastically schematic national stereotypes to the Reich's political ambitions contributed to the shift in academy, and beyond it, more than anything else. It was in the aftermath of World War II that the study of national representations acquired new, "post-national" dimension (Leerssen, "Imagology" 21).

French comparatist scholars, Jean-Marie Carré and his student Marius-Francois Guyard are credited with grounding the study of images and myths of others in the discipline of Comparative Literature. Their line of thought was, however, debunked by the leading literary critic of the time, Renée Wellek, who proclaimed imagology as extrinsic to the concerns of literary scholars (Leerssen, "Imagology" 23). Wellek's critique contributed to relegating image studies to the position of inferiority. It was Belgian comparatist Hugo Dyserinck, who rehabilitated the status of imagology within literary studies through his Aachen Program of Comparitism, which "demonstrated both the intrinsic literary function and the general ideological importance of national images" (Beller, "Perception" 9). Dyserinck and his colleagues are credited with liberating imagology from ideological constraints and turning it into an objective field of study (Sánchez Romero 11). Among their most significant findings, and imagology's principal guidelines at the same time, Dyserinck lists dissociation between testable facts regarding national groups and their mental representations, yet close interplay between images of the other and images of one's own country. Accordingly, to assure critical rigor and neutrality of the process of analysis, image studies must begin at a

supranational level in order to expose layers of meaning which have accumulated around national representations. Therefore, what Dyserinck proposes as the purpose of image studies is not just a palimpsestic analysis of national images expressed in textual form, but also "the possibility of developing—in literature and its surrounding field—post-national identity models" (n. pag.).

The scholarly work of Dyserinck and his circle found its expression in the series of collections and monographs published in Amsterdam under the title *Studia Imagologica*. Particularly the thirteenth volume in the series, *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters* (2007), constitutes a comprehensive introduction to the history and method of imagology, and has proved particularly helpful in the context of the present chapter. In what follows, some of the guiding principles of the specialism will be outlined with the aim of establishing methodological tools and vocabulary which I will later employ to analyze American images of Eastern Europe in selected works of literature.

2.2. Studying Representations of Self and Other: Method

At the heart of imagology lies the relationship between the entity represented (the *spected*) and the representing discourse (the *spectant*). Rather than limit themselves to the study of representations of the other, imagologists examine complex interdependence between *hetero-images* and *auto-images* as negotiated through literature. The specialism operates within the realm of the *imagined* that is all that lies outside "the area of testable reports or statements of fact" (Beller and Leerssen, Foreword xiv). Accordingly, imagology is not concerned with the study of social realities. Instead, its purpose is to critically examine a discourse which tends to be

subjective and simplified. Therefore, the nature of the sources must not be ignored or attenuated but should be taken into account in the analysis. While imagology seeks to identify patterns of mental stereotyping or othering, it remains cautious of associating these representations with empirical truths regarding national groups.

If the basic unit of imagological analysis is a mental representation of a given national entity expressed in a textual form, then the underlying question is how such images come into being and how they shape our thinking about others. According to Walter Lippmann: "For the most part we do not first see, and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what *our culture* has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture" (55, my emphasis). Therefore, the way we perceive others is to a large extent based on our culturally-determined, pre-conceived ideas and expectations. Additionally, our perceptions of otherness are inherently selective, leading us to form judgments that are unavoidably limited and schematized. To put it bluntly, we tend to focus on certain things while ignoring others.[36]

In analyzing representations of foreigners and non-native spaces, imagology must not only consider their subjective nature, but also pay particular attention to the *point of view* of the spectant; that is the position from which a given entity is perceived. There exist several factors which determine the process of constructing hetero-images. The way a given nation is perceived by another depends, among others, on the

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[36] To illustrate this point, Lippmann describes an experiment in which forty individuals were asked to report an unusual incident which all of them had witnessed simultaneously. The incident had been of course arranged in advance and then documented photographically. Interestingly, only one report contained less than 20 per cent of mistakes regarding the principal facts, while as many as thirteen viewers had more than half wrong. There were also twenty-four accounts which contained about 10 per cent of pure invention. What this experiment is telling us, argues Lippmann, is that a large portion of what we see is conditioned by the stereotyped images we have acquired in the course of our lives. The reports submitted by the viewers had been informed by their preconceptions regarding the incident—their mental representations of what a fight should look like.

geopolitical distance between them, the degree of common historical experience, and the type of interest involved (cultural, political or economic). Representations are attuned to international relations, which means that they may be active or dormant depending on the political status-quo. Although we tend to think of national images as fixed, they may change over time, reflecting "the vicissitudes of history and of shifting political relations (Beller, "Perspective" 396).

From the above considerations it transpires that a comprehensive definition of imagology should highlight the specialism's comparative character, expressed through its sensitivity to cross-national relations and their impact on both auto- and hetero-images. National images are culturally-intricate mental constructs, often invested with layers of preconceptions, prejudice, and clichés. Their study must thus account for this complexity, examining possible intertexts which might have contributed to their formation. Accordingly, Joep Leerseen points out that the first task which lies before an imagologist is to identify the tradition behind a given national trope and examine how the text in question engages with this tradition: "To which extent is that background tradition passively or actively echoed or reinforced, varied upon, negated, mocked or ignored by the individual instance in question?" ("Imagology" 28). Similarly, the value of a given national trope cannot be gauged in isolation. It is necessary to contextualize it within a given text, taking into consideration the literary genre it belongs to and its corresponding conventions (descriptive, humorous, propagandistic, etc.). Therefore, the imagologist must be equipped with the knowledge of theory and method of literary studies in order to meaningfully engage with the text at hand, assess what parameters are at work, and determine how they shape the role national images play within it. Equally significant is the historical contextualization of the text in accordance with Leerssen's admonition that "[l]iterary texts cannot be interpreted in a timeless, aesthetic

never-never land" ("Imagology" 28). This point is crucial for the study of the works discussed in this dissertation, which are firmly rooted in the geopolitical context of Cold-War international relations. Finally, Leerssen addresses the need to consider how the deployment of national tropes is shaped by the target-audience of a given text—for instance, John Updike's short stories on Eastern Europe discussed in this dissertation were written with *The New Yorker* reader in mind.

As pointed out earlier, sometimes national images lack stability and may operate in more than one version, like in the case of Germany whose representation has oscillated between "the Germany of poet-philosophers and the Germany of tyrannical technocrats" (Leerssen, "Imagology" 29). In imagological jargon, such combinations of counter-images are known as *imagemes*. William L. Chew uses the epithet "Janus-like" to refer to the binary character of imageme (184). In doing so, he draws a thought-provoking comparison with the Roman god of beginnings and endings, gates and thresholds, represented with a double-faced head, with each face looking in opposite direction. Interestingly, Janus is known as a liminal deity straddling two opposite worlds. Thus, national tropes may be termed as liminal in that they manifest themselves in more than one form, reflecting complex and varying interactions among nations. Depending on the circumstances, some aspects may come to the fore, while others remain quiescent. However, it is also possible for counter images to operate simultaneously in one single context. Chew provides an example of the celebrated American movie production *Schindler's List* (1993) in which two conflicting images of Germans are activated: "The opposition within the imageme is that of a creator of culture and (…) the destroyer of culture" (184). As the following chapters will show, liminal imagemes are prominent in American representations of Eastern Europe.

Since the mid-1970s the study of national representations, which until then had been restricted mainly to literature, has considerably broadened its scope, attracting scholars from such fields as history, sociology, postcolonial or women's studies, to name but a few (Chew III 167, Leerssen, "Imagology" 24). This, according to Leerssen, should be seen as part of a larger phenomenon—academia's growing interest in the processes of constructing national identities and traditions, stimulated by such works as Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983), or E.J. Hobsbawm and T.O. Ranger's *The Invention of Tradition* (1983). Particularly, Edward Said's seminal study *Orientalism* (1978) was a groundbreaking contribution, directing the attention of scholars and general readers alike toward the ways in which representations are constructed, consolidated and passed on. Although the response to Said's work had been polarized, *Orientalism* earned itself a secure place in international academia (Todorova, *Imagining* 8-9). In what follows I will briefly address those aspects of Said's work which have a bearing on my own study, particularly the idea of imaginative geographies.

Importantly, Said's scope of study is not limited to the image of one nation, but encompasses a broad conceptual category of the Orient, as constructed, represented, and consolidated in the collective Western imaginary. Similarly, this wide-ranging project, which Said terms Orientalism in reference to "the high-handed executive attitude of the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European colonialism" (2) is studied through varied textual sources, including but not limited to literary works. It is noteworthy that the method adopted in *Orientalism* bears much resemblance to the *modus operandi* specified by imagologists. Accordingly, the following methodological devices are established with the aim of exposing Orientalism's highly subjective and intertextual character: *strategic location* and *strategic formation*. The former describes the position an author assumes with respect to the Orient. In other words, what narrative

voice, structure, images, and themes constitute the tissue of the text, and how, in turn, these elements contribute to the author's project of representing the Orient. Along similar lines, imagology stipulates that meticulous attention be paid to the text's formal and content-related aspects in order to determine their role in the project of representing the other. As for strategic formation, it echoes Leerssen's postulate that a text must not be analyzed in isolation, but rather as part of a larger tradition. Therefore, strategic formation implies "analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass density and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large" (Said 20). At the same time, and again in line with imagology, Said is aware of the constructedness of representations, which do not reflect testable facts but *create* the Orient from an external perspective of the orientalist, relying on a series of Western techniques and conventions of depicting alterity. This principle of exteriority is particularly important as it permits the scholar to focus on the way the Orient is constructed rather than "the correctness of the representation," or "its fidelity to some great original" (Said 21). Moreover, like any image of ethnic otherness, Orientalism is not a static but changeable and multidimensional enterprise, reflecting current cultural trends and patterns. Thus the representation of the Orient exists in several versions: a linguistic Orient, a Freudian Orient, a racist Orient, etc. (Said 22).

Broadly speaking, Orientalism rests on the premise that geographical locales, regions and sectors are man-made. This proposition has proved extremely influential, inspiring a number of works in the spirit of what might be termed "interdisciplinary imagology." One of the key "traveling concepts" which has moved beyond Said's own theoretical framework is that of *imaginative geographies*. It refers to constructing differences between peoples, places, and cultures through "the universal practice of

designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space beyond 'ours' which is 'theirs'" (Said 54). Imaginative geographies may manifest themselves in different material forms. Said focused on a wide array of texts, but other scholars have looked for them also in art, photography, or the movies.[37] To explain the way in which imaginative geographies come into being, Said employs Gaston Bachelard's work on how ordinary spaces, for instance the space of a house, become endowed with imaginative or figurative quality: "So space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us" (55). Unfamiliar spaces, or spaces which are not our own are thus filled with significance, as we construct our mental representations of what they are like and how they are different from what is familiar to us. This, however, does not signify that imaginative geographies are solely creations or products of collective imagination. While they are certainly man-made and thus invested with a considerable dose of subjectivity, they do possess corresponding realities. The process of constructing mental representations of the other is often informed by specific historical and geographical knowledge; however, since no knowledge can be complete, especially if it concerns people or entities which are remote and exotic, emergent gaps tend to be patched up by suppositions and speculations which in time may achieve the status of common truths.

Moreover, since imaginative geographies circulate in material form, they "become sedimented over time to form an internally structured and, crucially, self-reinforcing archive," comparable to the tradition behind a given national trope in imagology ("Imaginative" 371). After all, a key feature of Orientalism understood as a collective body of texts is the fact that their authors read and referenced each other (Said

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[37] In "Imaginative Geographies, Dracula and the Transylvania 'Place Myth,'" (2008) Duncan Light discusses how Western imaginative geography of Transylvania has been shaped by literary and cinematic versions of the Dracula legend.

23). Importantly, while the Orient had been the object of Western gaze, it also served to define and consolidate Western identity: "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (Said 3). Similar argument is put forward by imagologists, who see the study of national representations in terms of dynamic tensions between hetero- and auto-images. As a rule, and as I wish to show in this dissertation, images of alterity tend to tell us more about those who produce them than about the spected.

Yet, even though Orientalism shares many methodological concerns with image studies, its scope and aspirations seem to reach beyond it.[38] Said's analysis of Orientalism as an example of imaginative geography par excellence focuses especially on the grids of power between the spected (the Orient) and the representing discourse. As Said put it: "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony" (5). Therefore, to study patterns of domination through Orientalist discourse is to assume that there is an intrinsic connection between culture and power that cannot be overlooked. Moreover, it implies that humanistic scholarship should not be detached from larger political realities (Said 9). At the same time, Said is anxious not to identify Orientalism with "a mere political subject matter or field that is reflected passively by culture, scholarship, or institutions" (12). While the discourse is "by no means in direct contact with political power in the raw" (12), it is nevertheless informed by different kinds of power: political, intellectual, cultural. Consequently, Said's analysis of the way the Orient is represented by the West is embedded in the long-standing imperial history of uneven and complex exchanges between the two. Furthermore, his approach to textual material is not bounded by literary theory, but entails a "broadly historical and

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[38] To appreciate it, one may wish to compare Said's study with an explicitly imagological work, such as those written by Waldemar Zacharasiewicz.

'anthropological'" perspective, in accordance with the scholar's conviction that "all texts are worldly and circumstantial in (of course) ways that vary from genre to genre and from historical period to historical period" (23). Also, what Said is dealing with is not a cultural representation of a given nationality, but rather an extensive conceptual rubric, encompassing different peoples populating this amorphous space known as Orient. In addition, his sources, broadly designated as Western, encompass British and French on the one hand and American on the other. The fact that Said relies on a wide plethora of sources, ranging from scholarly works, political tracts and religious studies to works of literature, provides his ambitious project with richness and momentum. Since *Orientalism*'s scope includes but is not limited to imaginative textual representations of Eastern otherness, its author may lay claim to analyzing a bigger picture than the one based solely on, say, works of fiction. At the same time, it must be noted that this broad object of study provoked criticism that "Said's work frequently relapses into the essentializing modes it attacks and is ambivalently enmeshed in the totalizing habits of western humanism" (Clifford 271).

At this point, I wish to delimit the scope and aspirations of the present study with respect to the issues discussed above in relation to imagology's general concerns and more specific premises of Orientalism. This dissertation addresses American imaginative geography of Eastern Europe, but it does not attempt to project this representation beyond the field of selected literature. To claim that Eastern Europe occupies a liminal space in the American imaginary would be far-fetched in a study whose sources are much limited. To prove such a claim, a far more extensive investigation would have to be conducted, involving an in-depth analysis of other forms of American discourse on Eastern Europe, such as media broadcasts, political propaganda, etc. In this respect, the present study, remains firmly rooted in the

traditional realm and method of imagology: the analysis of national images through literature, understood here mostly as fiction. At the same time, however, it attempts to follow in the footsteps of Said's *Orientalism* and other such studies, in that it sets out to examine how an extensive geopolitical area comprising several peoples rather than a single nationality is imagined in textual form. Last but not least, I wish to spell out my position on the relationship between the image of Eastern Europe and Orientalism understood as a colonial discourse. While I am well aware of the tight interplay between politics and culture, which is especially visible in those works which are firmly embedded in the framework of cultural diplomacy, I do not approach Eastern Europe as a Western colonial subject in this dissertation. Notwithstanding, I make use of certain concepts which are being used by postcolonial critics—most notably liminality, as I have shown in chapter 1, but also Said's imaginative geography, and, obviously, the idea of otherness and alterity which is imagology's central concern. I will return briefly to the issue of postcolonial approaches to Eastern Europe in the last chapter, which traces some critical tendencies in post-1989 scholarship on the region.

In this dissertation I analyze American imaginative geographies of Eastern Europe, as conveyed through selected works of literature. This, in turn, requires engagement with what Larry Wolff terms "the idea" of Eastern Europe, with a view to shedding some light on this complex entity. Therefore in the next three sections I attempt to enquire into the meaning(s) and significance of the area in question. Importantly, there is a double constructedness involved. The constructedness that lies at the heart of any representation, but also the constructedness which is proper to the object of this study: Eastern Europe.

2.3. Between East and West: The Idea of Eastern Europe

Imaginative geographies thrive on conceptual categories, such as East and West or Orient and Occident, which are deep-rooted in spite of having little ontological stability. These categories become totalized providing a lens through which the object of interest is scrutinized. In Said's assessment, Western imaginative geography draws a sharp line between the two categories, casting itself as "powerful and articulate," and the Orient as "defeated and distant" (57). As Maria Todorova, the author of a seminal study *Imagining the Balkans* (1997) points out, since the Orient is always constructed in contrast to the West, Orientalism is thus a "discourse about an imputed opposition" (17). Conversely, Todorova's own study concerned with the cultural construction of the Balkan region, while clearly indebted to Said's scholarship, situates the discourse on the Balkans at the crossroads between East and West. Drawing on anthropological writings of Mary Douglas and Arnold van Gennep, Todorova evokes the idea of liminality to illustrate the Balkans' ambiguous position as "a bridge between Europe and Asia, East and West" (*Imagining* 16). With the benefit of inside knowledge, which illuminates her impressive scholarly insights, the Bulgarian historian argues that the metaphor of a threshold is not only an external rhetoric which the West uses to label the region, but also the Balkans' internalized self-image, which "has acquired a mantralike quality that most writers on the region like to evoke as its central attribute" (*Imagining* 59). Yet, as the study poignantly shows, the liminal condition of the Balkans underlies Western perceptions of the region as Europe's backwater: "The Balkans are also a bridge between stages of growth, and this invokes labels such as semideveloped, semicolonial, semicivilized, semioriental" (*Imagining* 16). It is no coincidence that the scholar lists Mary Douglas's writings among the works which inspired her study. As mentioned in

chapter 1, Turner's characterization of liminal beings as polluting and dangerous in the eyes of external observers is indebted to Douglas. In *Imagining the Balkans*, Todorova applies the idea of "ambiguity (…) treated as anomaly" to foreground the region's construction not so much as "an incomplete other," but "an incomplete self," which, apart from being dangerous to others, poses a threat to itself (17-18). Later in this chapter I will briefly return to this idea in relation to Western representations of Balkan countries in literature.

Importantly, ontological in-betweenness lies at the heart of Larry Wolff's *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (1994), in which the author critically examines the conceptual category of Eastern Europe. Like Said's and Todorova's works, Wolff analysis is not limited to a single ethno-cultural community but encompasses a broad geographical region populated by several nationalities. In fact, Wolff acknowledges Said's scholarship, claiming that the eighteenth-century making of Eastern Europe "was inflected by aspects of Orientalism" (*Inventing* xi). The study vividly demonstrates that the lands lying in the Eastern parts of Europe had long been subject to the processes of stereotyping and othering. According to the historian, Eastern Europe is, above all, an intellectual project, an idea and a mental concept whose origins should be traced back to the Age of Enlightenment. In what follows, I briefly reiterate Wolff's argument, since it constitutes one of the most significant theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation.

Interestingly, in the Renaissance the division of Europe fell along the North-South axis. At that time, Italy was seen as the cultural center of the continent. The invasion of Italy by France in 1494 inaugurated a period of barbarian invasions from the North. The cultural gap between Italy and Northern barbarians, such as Germans, was perceived as an equivalent of demarcating boundary dividing Europe into the lands of

civilization and those of barbarism. During the Enlightenment, Poland and Russia became mentally separated from Sweden and Denmark and associated with Hungary and Bohemia, the Balkan lands of the Ottoman Europe, as well as the Crimea on the Black Sea. It was Voltaire and other philosophers of the era who were responsible for the change of perspective: looking from West to East rather than from North to South. Therefore, a "conceptual reorientation of Europe," which is still valid today, has been inherited from the Enlightenment's intellectuals (Wolff, *Inventing* 5).[39] At the time, lands lying to the East of the cultural capitals of Europe proper were still relatively unknown and thus exuded the lure of the exotic. To many Western travelers, they offered a promise of a rewarding geographical discovery and a worthy pedagogical project too—once they have visited these unexplored lands, they could share their first-hand knowledge with their contemporaries through narratives and travelogues. The project of inventing Eastern Europe for the sake of Western eyes is called "philosophic geography," a term which bears strong resemblance to Said's imaginative geographies. Wolff defines it as "the Enlightenment's subordination of geography to its own philosophical values, its investment of the map with subtleties that eluded the stricter standards of scientific cartography" (*Inventing* 6). The phrase has been borrowed from the journal of the American explorer, John Ledyard, who in 1787 set out on a journey around the globe, under the auspices of Thomas Jefferson, who was then an American minister to France. Ledyard's travel itinerary, which included Paris, Brussels, Cologne, Berlin, Warsaw, St. Petersburg, Moscow, and Kamchatka, was a journey "from west to east, from civilization to incivilization" (Wolff, *Inventing* 346). The further he traveled, the more did he distance himself from the Western civilization; its superior manners and

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[39] Piotr Wandycz attributes the conceptual divide into East and West to the nineteenth-century debate in Russia between Westerners and Slavophiles. Later on, this dualist approach to Europe was adopted by many historians, who explained the division using "a cultural-religious criterion" (2). Thus, the evolution of one part of the continent was determined by the Byzantine Greek Orthodox heritage, while the Roman-Germanic (either Catholic or Protestant) tradition shaped the other (2).

distinguished culture. However, Ledyard's bold scheme was quickly interrupted when he was arrested for traveling in Russia without an official permission from the empress Catherine the Great. The traveler got expelled from the empire and transported to Poland, which to him seemed to occupy a curious intermediary position between the East and the West. According to Ledyard's enlightened philosophic geography, Poland constituted a middle point on the gradation scale between Western civilization and Eastern barbarism. It was not until the explorer had crossed the border separating Poland from Prussia that he felt he finally reached Europe proper with its corresponding virtues. Therefore, traversing "the great barrier" separating Asiatic and European manners signified also moving away from such vices as servility, indolence, filth, dishonesty, and ignorance, and embracing the virtues of industry, frankness, intelligence, and good manners, which made the explorer gratefully declare: "Once more [I] welcome Europe to my warmest Embraces" (qtd. in Wolff, *Inventing* 354).

Although Wolff does not refer to Arnold van Gennep or Victor Turner, it is clear to any scholar of liminality that in Ledyard's representation Eastern Europe is cast as a liminal space partaking in two systems and their corresponding sets of values.[40] It emerges as a "paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, Europe but not Europe" (Wolff, *Inventing* 7). Curiously enough, some intellectuals did not need to travel physically to explore Eastern Europe through their writings. Voltaire, for instance, wrote extensively about Russia without visiting it once, while Rousseau advocated for Poland but never actually saw it. Thus, exploring Eastern Europe and teaching it to the Enlightenment's readership was a far-reaching intellectual project involving some first-hand experience and close observation, but also a large measure of preconceptions and generalizations. Each traveler undertaking a journey to Eastern Europe, whether real or

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[40] At one point, Wolff even speaks of "the sense of geographical liminality" with reference to the position of Eastern Europe on the imaginative map of the Enlightenment (*Inventing* 210).

imaginary, was equipped with a mental map ready "to be freely annotated, embellished, refined or refolded along the way" (Wolff, *Inventing* 6). Such mental mapping involved the process of association and comparison; the lands of Eastern Europe were mentally associated with one another and contrasted with the Western ones. As a result, there emerged a common conceptual rubric called Eastern Europe involving fact and fiction about the lands thought to comprise the region. The verb "thought" has not been used randomly here, for the borders of the region were not fixed, defying cartographic divisions and catering to mental mappings instead. Therefore, the geographical line between Europe and Asia was not unanimously established, sometimes being located at the Don, sometimes at the Volga, and sometimes, as is the case today, at the Urals.

Visiting Eastern Europe meant traveling not only in space but also in time. Wolff reports that when Louis-Philippe, comte de Ségur, crossed the boundary between Prussia and Poland he not only felt as if he abandoned Europe entirely, but also as if he moved back some ten centuries. The inhabitants of this exotic land were evoked through their ancient designations—Huns, Scythians, Veneti, Slavs, and Sarmatians. The count could not quite fathom what place he reached; he knew it was not Europe, but neither was it the Orient. As Wolff puts it, the traveler found himself immersed in some "(…) intermediary geographical space, with no precise location in time or history, where the inversions of nature were such that even his travel by land turned into an 'ocean' voyage. In spite of his overland intentions, Ségur was at sea" (*Inventing* 19). Paradox, chaos and confusion were the qualities associated with the elusive character of the Eastern lands under the Enlightenment's curious gaze. In order to come to terms with Eastern Europe's perplexing nature, travelers described it and judged it with reference to the familiar West. Therefore, Eastern European character, mores and ways were juxtaposed with their Western counterparts, the latter serving as an indelible blueprint of

what was and what was not right in the civilized world. In a word, Eastern Europe's lowly liminal status helped to consolidate Western Europe's position as the dominant force within the continent. Simultaneously, Eastern Europe helped to define Western Europe as "the Europe we think of as the real thing" (Hoffman, *Exit* xi).

It is noteworthy that Russia's place on the Enlightenment's maps was similarly ambiguous. Depending on the traveler, it was either included or excluded from the conceptual category of Eastern Europe. It must be remembered that the idea of Eastern Europe originated in Western Europe, and Russia underwent the same processes of mental mapping in the spirit of Ledyard's philosophic geography as other Eastern European nation-states, "subjected to the same process of discovery, alignment, condescension, and intellectual mastery, [it] was located and identified by the same formulas: between Europe and Asia, between civilization and barbarism" (Wolff, *Inventing* 15).

Mental mapping which was at work in the Age of Enlightenment was hardly an innocent enterprise. As Wolff insightfully observes, it was soon to come into the service of military domination, exposing an intricate relationship between knowledge and power. Imperialistic ambitions of more powerful nation-states turned Eastern Europe into an arena of extensive territorial conflicts, fixing it in the eighteenth-century formula of instability and incompleteness for centuries to come. The image of Eastern Europe as poorer, less cultured, and generally less able relative of its Western sister was of course not just a product of the West's malicious imagination. Although both Poland and Hungary were once empires in their own right,[41] the long-standing experience of imperial subjugation, with strong nations swallowing small ones, weakened the region in all possible ways (L. Johnson 4). The geography of these liminal lands contributed to

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[41] In the 16th century, Poland was the largest state in Europe. As for Hungary, until 1918 it was three times larger than it is today (L. Johnson 4).

their fate; the lack of natural frontiers and advantageous central situation made them easy to control and conquer. According to some scholars, there have always existed certain profound disparities between Western and Eastern parts of the continent. Among them, historian E. Garrison Walters lists climate, access to navigable waterways, as well as the presence of natural defensible boundaries. These differences have been sufficiently broad so as to produce a different chronology of economic, political and social development, with Eastern Europe taking a permanent secondary position with respect to its Western counterpart (Walters 110-11). Walters even goes as far as to suggest that before the Iron Curtain partitioned the continent in two there had existed an invisible though meaningful boundary between Eastern and Western Europe. For Larry Wolff, however, this boundary is primarily mental. The scholar establishes a productive dialog between the Enlightenment's Eastern Europe and the twentieth-century representations of the Soviet sphere of influence. Writing in 1994, Wolff argues that the mental image of communist Eastern Europe, whose persistent shadow is still present even though the political structures which held it in place dissolved, is indebted to the intellectual tradition of imaginative/philosophic geography practiced in the Age of Reason (*Inventing* 2-3). Not only does he identify the mental mapping underlying the post-war conception of Eastern Europe, but also suggests that the divisive rhetoric about the Iron Curtain splitting the continent into two unequal halves hides "the traces of an intellectual history that invented the idea of Eastern Europe long before" (4). In this light, post-war Eastern Europe emerges as an externally-imposed designation, a geopolitical construct, and a conceptual rubric. "The Other Europe" [42] became smoothly

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[42] The term alludes to the title of the Penguin book series edited by Philip Roth, entitled "Writers from the Other Europe." The adjective "other" implies different mappings, both positive and negative. In the context of the Penguin series, it denotes a rich if little-known cultural universe. However, it may also point to the secondary status of Eastern Europe within the continent, emphasizing the positional superiority of Europe proper, that is Western Europe, and casting Eastern Europe as the West's *other*.

assimilated into the Western mind because it was hardly new—the division into a better and a worse Europe had been there before.

The constructedness inherent in the idea of Eastern Europe is already apparent at the level of nomenclature which reflects not just its geographical location but also various political, economic, and cultural narratives concerning the region. The shifting borders of the nation-states like Poland, whose territory had been partitioned among foreign forces three times during the eighteenth century, form part of what Lonnie Johnson calls a "singular Central-European historical experience" (4). Johnson's turn of phrase merits closer attention. By using the term "Central Europe" he outlines the scope of his study which covers Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, and Croatia, but also Germany and Austria as "integral parts of the region" (6). However, it should be noted that many of the countries which make up Johnson's "Central Europe" have been variously treated by other authors as parts of *Eastern Europe*, *East-Central Europe*, *Mitteleuropa*, and *the Other Europe*. For instance, in Walters's *The Other Europe: Eastern Europe to 1945*, published one year before the collapse of communism, the subject matter is defined as Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, and Albania. This scope would be synonymous with Soviet-dominated Eastern Europe if it were not for the exclusion of East Germany. Conversely, a recent work by Ian D. Armour defines Eastern Europe in purely geographical terms, as an area stretching from the Baltic States to Greece (1). In Introduction to *Central and Eastern Europe since 1919* (2008), Adrian Webb observes that the task of justifying the geographical limits of the entity under discussion is by no means easy since the terms "Central" and especially "Eastern Europe" "have been used to describe subjective perceptions rather than objective geographical realities" (x). In a similar vein, Johnson admits that the concept of Central Europe is confusing as it may

"refer to different things for different people" (6), while Jacques Rupnik observes that the answer to the question: "Who actually are the Central Europeans?" varies from country to country (5). Moreover, it is noteworthy that authors like Rupnik, whose work, written in the late 1980s, is visibly sympathetic toward Eastern Europe, may have deliberately chosen to use the name "Central," or "Other" Europe to show their consideration and acknowledgment of the intellectual idea of Central Europe propagated in the 1980s. The contested nature of these designations, and what they stand for, has been pinpointed by Peter Okey who proclaimed that "Central/eastern Europe is no place for the tidy-minded" (104). Notwithstanding, these terms merit closer attention for they reveal different, often conflicting narratives about this complex space.

Czech historian Miroslav Hroch traces *Central Europe* back to the Congress of Vienna in 1814 and Clemens von Metternich's conception of a European balance of power between West (Britain and France) and East (Russia). In between there was meant to be Central Europe with the decisive role of the newly emerging Austrian Empire. Therefore, Central Europe was both a geographical territory and "a construct assigned with a mission in the general interest of all of Europe," which originated in the realm of political and cultural discourse (Hroch 22-23). But Central Europe had also a cultural dimension: it envisioned an intellectual and artistic unity of the region under the auspices of Vienna (Cornis-Pope and Neubauer 3). To talk about Central European culture at the turn of the century is to evoke a rich cosmopolitan realm with a special role played by Jewish intellectuals (Wasserstein 358).[43] Some scholars even speak about a common literary identity of Central Europe which sets the writers of this area apart from those outside. Such authors as Jaroslav Hašek, Joseph Roth, Arnold Zweig, and

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[43] It is this collective cultural tradition that inspired the idea of *Central Europe* which emerged in the 1980s in opposition to Soviet-bound Eastern Europe. Although this was more of a perception than a concrete project, it nonetheless represented a strong intellectual opposition to the dominant narrative. This conception is discussed in connection with Milan Kundera's writings in the last section of the present chapter.

Franz Kafka are thought to share some common traits: certain resignation, fatalism, laxness, and *Schlamperei*, but also a peculiar sense of humor, which would not be understood outside the region (Osers 47-53). This multiethnic and culturally diverse Central Europe virtually ceased to exist as a consequence of the Second World War (L. Johnson 234, Judt, *A Grand Illusion* 54).

The emergence of a unified Germany in the mid-nineteenth-century destabilized the existing balance of power, turning the region into an arena of German political expansion (Hroch 32). "Central Europe" became eclipsed by the conception of *Mitteleuropa*. This German term, which literally means "middle Europe", is ambiguous and controversial. Until 1871, Germans thought of themselves as the inhabitants of *das Land der Mitte*, the lands lying in the center, and the term referred mainly to the country's geographical position in-between East and West (L. Johnson 165). With the establishment of the Kaiserreich, Mitteleuropa began to be associated with German imperial designs to dominate Central Europe and, in some cases, even the whole continent. The idea became popularized in Friedrich Naumann's 1915 publication under the same title, in which he envisioned an association of states with Germany at the helm.[44] Interestingly, Naumann's idea of Europe, though clearly oriented toward German supremacy, was not hostile to the affiliated nations. However, Mitteleuropa's ambiguous nature eventually proved to be a double-edged sword. The conception smoothly inscribed itself into two dominant lines of German expansionism: *Weltpolitik*

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[44] In Naumann's vision, Germany was to be an "overstate," acting as the sole leader, an industrial center, technological innovator and financial manager. The minimal version of Mitteleuropa was to be based on a common market between Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. According to a more ambitious alternative, the formation would include Poland (detached from Russia), parts of Russian empire, the Balkan Peninsula, together with Denmark, Belgium, Luxembourg, and France. The overall assumption was that smaller states would not be able to survive without forming alliances with more powerful ones.

(global politics) and *Lebensraum* (living space) which would later exert a considerable impact on Adolf Hitler's Nazi doctrine.[45]

While the term "Mitteleuropa" tends to summon predominantly negative images for those nations who fell victim to German imperialism, its meaning may vary depending on the context in which the name is uttered. Says Johnson: "If an Austrian uses the term in Prague or Budapest or Krakow, it inevitably conjures up relatively nostalgic, Habsburg imperial associations; but when a German uses it, people start thinking about imperialism" (165). Such mental mappings are at work also when "Eastern Europe" and "Central Europe" are evoked. Polish people, for instance, dislike being subsumed under the category of Eastern Europe. The name still evokes negative associations with harsh political realities, low standards of living, and Soviet-imposed backwardness. Particularly since Poland's accession to the EU (together with several other former Eastern Bloc countries), Poles feel part of Central Europe, or simply Europe, not only geographically but also politically, socially and culturally. I will return to these internal mental mappings in the last chapter.

For enlightened intellectuals, Eastern Europe was a liminal realm suspended somewhere between the civilized West and the backward East. Given the timeframe of

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[45] An idea conceived in stark opposition to Germany's politics of *Drang nach Osten*–yearning for the East—was expounded by the founder and first President of Czechoslovakia, T.G. Masaryk in 1918. His Europe was an elongated zone of small nations between Germany and Russia. Masaryk's conception correlated with a new role envisioned for the states carved out of Russian, German and Austro-Hungarian empires after World War I. Therefore, Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Austria, Hungary, Yugoslavia and Romania were to serve as the cordon sanitaire against the expansion of Germany and the spread of the Soviet breed of communism (L. Johnson 197). Similarly, General Józef Piłsudski's conception of *Intermarium* envisioned a federation, under the auspices of Poland, uniting the Baltic states, Finland, Belarus, Ukraine, Hungary, Romania, Yugoslavia, and Czechoslovakia. The federation, like Masaryk's Europe, was conceived in the interest of small nation states and as a vital counterbalance to Russian and German imperialism. All these conceptions crashed under the weight of an ideology in which nationalism acquired most terrifying dimensions. Nazism was concerned exclusively with Germany and creating German living space by pushing to the East at all cost and cleansing the area of all "polluting elements." Hitler was a firm believer in a large-scale mental mapping and placing geography at the bloody service of politics—he claimed that the only boundary between Europe and Asia was the one dividing Germany from the Slavonic world and it was Germany's right and duty to place that border wherever it wanted to. In his diabolic project of pan-Germanic Europe, the re-establishment of the old imperial German borders from before the Treaty of Versailles and subjugation of Mitteleuropa were just preliminary steps on the way to war with the Soviet Union and acquiring necessary living territory for the pure German race (L. Johnson 207-08).

this dissertation, the question is what mental image the same name conjured in post-1945 context, as well as what was the relationship between the image and its Western spectant at the time? In what follows, the conceptual and sociopolitical "making" of Eastern Europe is discussed, following Peter Bugge's proposition that there is no clear boundary between perceptions and projects for Europe, since "[a]ll projects are nourished by perceptions of Europe, and these perceptions again, at least implicitly, contain suggestions for change" (84).

2.4. The New World Order: Making Eastern Europe

The semantic making of Eastern Europe is usually associated with Winston Churchill's famous Fulton speech of March 5th 1946:

> From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic an *iron curtain* has descended across the Continent.[46] Behind that line lie all the capitals of the ancient states of Central and Eastern Europe. Warsaw, Berlin, Prague, Vienna, Budapest, Belgrade, Bucharest and Sofia, all these famous cities and the populations around them lie in what I must call the Soviet sphere, and all are subject in one form or another, not only to Soviet influence but to a very high and, in some cases, increasing measure of control from Moscow (qtd. in Kishlansky 298).

The image of an Iron Curtain dividing the continent into two unequal halves has proved extremely powerful. Seven decades later, scholars and journalists still like to evoke

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[46] In fact, the phrase "Iron Curtain" had been used by Joseph Goebbels already in 1945 in a newspaper article in which the Nazi minister predicted Bolshevization of the Eastern parts of Europe (Wasserstein 427).

Churchill's metaphor in reference to the Cold-War world order.[47] However, until 1989 it was much more than a spectacular turn of phrase. Churchill's speech described the new way of conceptualizing the region along the East-West axis—both in theory and practice. Here, the interconnectedness between projects for and perceptions of Europe was perhaps most evident. From 1945 until 1989, and beyond, "Eastern Europe" denoted not only a geopolitical construct, but also constituted a pair of lenses through which the countries subsumed under this category were perceived. Particularly Americans and West Europeans came to see Sovietized countries as a homogenous bloc, despite vast cultural and sociopolitical differences between them (Applebaum xxvii).

In a sense, Churchill's representation of post-war Europe in terms of polar opposites echoes the Enlightenment's imaginative geography. In fact, some diplomatic historians of the Cold War wondered if Churchill's speech was a self-fulfilling prophecy or whether it actually contributed to the "crystallization of ideological spheres in Europe, hastening the hardening of lines" (Wolff, *Inventing* 2). Czech writer Milan Kundera expressed the creation of Eastern Europe in the following words: "After 1945, the border between the two Europes shifted several hundred kilometers to the west, and several nations that had always considered themselves to be Western woke up to discover that they were now in the east" ("The Tragedy" 1). Kundera points to the existence of three Europes: Western, Eastern, and Central. By virtue of Yalta settlements, Central Europe, which had been traditionally tied to Western civilization, ceased to exist and was replaced with an artificially created construct defying the region's cultural roots—Eastern Europe. This new entity was thus "culturally in the West and politically in the East" (Kundera, "The Tragedy" 1). The Iron Curtain

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[47] As I will prove in the last chapter, the metaphor has surfaced recently in connection with Russian-Ukrainian conflict.

separated it from the rest of the world, constituting "a crucial structural boundary, in the mind and on the map" (Wolff, *Inventing* 1) and turning Eastern Europe into an idée fixe for years to come. Kundera's words highlight the immediacy and violence of the divide: Central Europeans suddenly "woke up to" the new reality. Yet the process of constructing Eastern Europe was gradual and carefully architected.

Interestingly, Churchill himself was more than an innocent observer of the divide. Before he semantically partitioned Europe into two separate blocks, he had already participated in outlining the new order of the continent in October 1944. In anticipation of Yalta settlements, the British prime minister met with Joseph Stalin to produce the so-called "percentage agreement." The shape of Europe was expressed with numbers, which Churchill nonchalantly jotted down on a sheet of paper placed at the dinner table. The paper was then passed to Stalin who looked at it, marked it with a large blue check, and returned it to Churchill (L. Johnson 229). One year before, in Teheran, Churchill put mental mapping at the service of geopolitics to determine the shape of Poland with the help of three matches. The matches on the left and right represented Polish borders with Germany and the Soviet Union, respectively. The middle match stood for the border the Soviet Union wanted. Churchill moved the match on the right to the far left to show how Poland would be compensated for its Eastern lands by earning the territories in the West, at the expense of Germany (L. Johnson 227).

The main goals that the Big Three (Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin) faced in Yalta were concerned with the post-war planning: the treatment of the defeated Nazi Germany, the shape of Poland, hastening of the end of war with Japan, and securing world peace. The last, and arguably most ambitious, objective was differently interpreted by each politician. Churchill was concerned about the Soviet Union's

influence and the threat it represented to Western democracies. Roosevelt, whose priority was the shape of the new United Nations organization, trusted that Stalin would assume the role of one of the guarantors of world peace. Therefore, the concessions made to the Soviet Union were perceived as necessary for securing global order. Eastern Europe represented only marginal interest to the Western leaders (Applebaum 21). Meanwhile, for Stalin "global peace" was synonymous with a tight Soviet security zone in the region. By virtue of Yalta agreements, Germany was divided into four zones of occupation: Russian in the East, British in the North-West, American in the South-West, and a small French zone carved out of British and American areas. Poland's Eastern frontier was debated, and the Anglo-American forces came to accept the fact that the country would belong to the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, helping to "protect the Soviet Union from future aggressions" (L. Johnson 244). Although the new border was not sanctioned until the Potsdam conference held later that year, the decisions outlined at Yalta represented Western powers' capitulation to Stalin's demands (Wasserstein 399). Therefore, even though Eastern Europe was not "made" at Yalta, the conference marked the beginning of the process. What ensued only goes to show that the West's hopes in the Soviet Union's adherence to the democratic rules of the game were, essentially, wishful thinking (L. Johnson 232).

In fact, the process of imposing the Soviet model on Europe began as early as 1939, when Stalin invaded Poland and then occupied the Baltic States, parts of Romania and Eastern Finland. The Red Army officers and NKVD staff immediately started to implement their own system in the occupied zones, using mass violence and deportations as a means of subjugating local peoples. Even before the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union in 1941, Stalin was preparing the ground for turning the countries of the region into his communist dominion (Applebaum xxix).

The Red Army's liberation of Eastern Europe marked the beginning of a new occupation in the region which had not been given time to recover from the former one.[48] As Arpad Szakolczai observed, the liminal situation of World War II did not come to an end but was prolonged, seemingly *ad infinitum*, through the introduction of the communist regime. Still, to many the arrival of the Soviets meant freedom from German occupation and genuine hopes for a better world at last. The gates of concentration camps and Gestapo prisons were opened. Jews who managed to survive the war were allowed to leave their hiding places. Polish could be spoken again after years of being forbidden in Western parts of the country. Czechoslovakia, embittered by Western compliance in the Munich agreement, greeted the Soviets as liberators rather than invaders. Bruised and vulnerable, Czechoslovaks saw the Soviets as harbingers of reform and change. The experience of war left many people profoundly disillusioned with the world they had grown up in. The collapse of whole nations, disintegration of political systems, and overturn of traditional values created a vacuum which needed to be filled. In the absence of political intellectual elites, who had been largely eliminated by the Nazis and also in some cases by the Soviets themselves, many individuals felt attracted by the Soviet version of the new social order. Communists seized at the opportunity with unwavering determination and powerful resources.

While there was not a "rigid blueprint" guiding Moscow and local communists in the project of imposing communism in Eastern Europe, there existed certain key elements that were imported into every nation occupied by the Red Army (Applebaum xxxi, Rotschild and Wingfield 76). First, in the slavish dedication to the Moscow line,

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[48] There exist two different accounts of Soviet liberation of Eastern Europe. According to Soviet historiography, the capital cities of Warsaw, Budapest, Prague, Vienna, and Berlin were liberated from the Nazi hegemony and freedom was restored to the happiness of local populations. In reality, the Soviet entry into the region was marked by looting and rape (Applebaum, Wasserstein). Soon unofficial robbery became more organized, assuming the form of official "reparations." Having been indoctrinated about their system's superiority over capitalism, Soviet troops were shocked to discover that even poorer parts of the region stood in sharp contrast to the misery of underdeveloped rural Russia. Their reaction was to take along whatever they could.

communists embarked on the project of purging national political structures of non-communists and perceived political opponents. To achieve this goal, they took hold of certain crucial ministries, like the Ministry of Interior, which gave them control over police, security forces, and media.[49] In a pretense of maintaining democratic rules, free elections were held in some countries in 1945 and 1946. With the exception of Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, where communists enjoyed some popularity, it soon became clear that they would not gain power through the ballot box (Judt, *Postwar* 132). The solution lay in the strategy of terror and repression. Political opposition was severely punished; show trials and subsequent imprisonments made it clear that the party would not tolerate dissent from the official doctrine. The elimination of "non-believers" and those who did not believe strongly enough was then followed by a gradual implementation of the hardline Stalinist model, which entailed abolishment of democratic institutions, nationalizing industry and commerce, collectivizing agriculture, and severely restricting civil liberties,[50] among others. Between 1945 and 1948, seven European countries were incorporated into a communist bloc: Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Eastern Germany, Romania, Bulgaria, Albania. Yugoslavia was an exception, for it installed a communist government without Soviet help. As Anne Applebaum highlights, "Eastern Europe" was a political and historical entity, not a geographic one (xxvii). It excluded geographically "Eastern" countries like Greece, or the Baltic States, which at that time formed part of the Soviet Union. Although the countries differed extensively and had not been unified before 1945, now they

[49] Equally important was the Ministry of Justice, as a means of staging trials, organizing purges, and controlling judges.

[50] Secret police created in the image of the Soviet NKVD was probably the most oppressive form of Soviet subjugation. Using people trained in Moscow as well as local collaborators, it intended to control and spread terror throughout society. Communists took charge of mass media, especially the most powerful one, the radio, with the aim of controlling the flow of information and turning the medium into a Party-dominated propaganda tool. They were also particularly intent on destroying all manifestations of civil society; independent organizations, especially youth groups, were persecuted and banned.

represented a common political and conceptual rubric, whose overriding feature was their shared experience of communism.

What Applebaum terms "the crushing of Eastern Europe" was also targeted at national cultures and literatures. Under communist rule, everything had to have a political purpose: art, literature and music were to serve the new socialist dogma. This was clearly the motivation behind the expurgation of Czechoslovak literature in the years following the war. Apparently, in the liquidation of national literature the communists outdid even the Nazis. The destroyed, confiscated and banned works were replaced with the oeuvre of communist leaders, Stalin, Lenin and Gottwald, as well as books which were regarded ideologically correct, or at last harmless (Renner 22). With time, each manifestation of artistic creativity was influenced one way or another by the official ideology, as were the lives of painters, writers, musicians, architects, and filmmakers of the region. The figure of the censor became central to this new Eastern European culture and synonymous with the subjugation of something as elusive as artistic spirit to ideological tenants.[51] As far as literature is concerned, thematic uniformity was fostered and writers were placed in the role of "engineers of human soul," socialist soul for that matter.[52] The Soviet model was to be followed and aberrations of the norm were not to be tolerated. If some English and American films and books had been permitted in Poland before 1947, now party activists ordered limiting their imports, as well as restricting activities of such organizations as the British Council or English-language study groups in schools (Paczkowski 257). The

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[51] For instance, as early as 1947, the Cultural-Educational Commission of the Polish Communist Party compiled a list of themes that were to be addressed in Polish artistic endeavors. Among them were "contemporary Polish heroes and statesmen," "revolutionary results of agrarian reform," and "the nationalization of industry" (Paczkowski 257). The communists called for new consciousness of Polish citizens whose eyes were to look to the future rather than focus on the past. State-imposed culture was to be an instrument in achieving this lofty aim. That said, artistic freedom was deemed "falsely interpreted" and "anachronistic" (Paczkowski 257).

[52] While the phrase is attributed to Joseph Stalin, it was later adopted by Czech emigré writer Josef Škvorecký, who used it as the title of one of his best-known novels, *The Engineer of Human Souls* from 1977.

party's vitriolic attitude to Western culture was viciously expressed by the Soviet writer

Aleksandr Fadeyev at the 1948 Congress of Intellectuals in the Cause of Peace: "If

hyenas knew how to use a fountain-pen and jackals could type, they would write like

T.S. Eliot" (qtd. in Paczowski 258).

Meanwhile, intellectuals at home were facing a complex moral dilemma.

Initially, many of them had been attracted by the "New Faith" and became party

members or at least *fellow travelers*, idealistically believing that the system promised a

better future.[53] Some of the best Polish writers flirted with the doctrine of socialist

realism, producing works which glorified Stalin and the tenants of ideology. Among

them was Wisława Szymborska, a Polish poet and a Nobel Prize laureate, who wrote

several poems in line with the style and mannerisms dictated by the party. When asked

about this "Stalinist" episode in her writing trajectory, Szymborska blamed it on her

"foolishness, naivety and perhaps intellectual laziness" ("Wislawa" n. pag.).[54]

In Czechoslovakia, many prominent authors were also party members at first.

The same is true also for Hungary. To understand a peculiar allure of the new system, it

is necessary to bear in mind the role historical circumstances played in the formation of

national cultures in different Eastern European countries. It must be remembered that

initially in Czechoslovakia there was no open hostility toward the Soviet Union. As

mentioned earlier, when the Soviet troops entered the country they were seen as

liberators, not as occupants. Therefore, when in 1948 the Communist Party seized

power, as a result of a coup d'état which gave it undisputed control over the

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[53] The allure of Soviet communism and the process of intellectual enslavement by the system were most famously examined by Czesław Miłosz in *The Captive Mind* (1953).
    [54] Szymborska was no exception. During World War II, Tadeusz Konwicki, a Polish writer and film director, was a partisan in the Polish resistance military movement: the Home Army. First he fought against the Nazis, then against the Soviets. When he was finally able to leave his hiding place and return to Poland, he realized that his family home was no longer included within the new Polish borders. Poor, lonely and with no higher education, he wondered what path to choose: "During the war, I saw so much slaughter. I saw a whole world of ideas, humanism, morality collapse. I was alone in this ruined country. What should I do? Which way to go" (qtd. in Applebaum 17). In the 1950s Konwicki drifted into the communist party, producing works in the style of socialist realism.

Czechoslovak government, it managed not only to garner the highest indigenous support in the region, but also successfully attract the intellectual elite of the country (Falk 59). Milan Kundera and Ivan Klíma, the authors which are of special significance in the present study, were both party members, as were many others. In fact, the famous Prague Spring reform movement of 1968 would not have been possible if the writers and intellectuals had not "largely funneled their energies toward working with and then reforming the regime" (Falk 67). Many of them were socialists and believed that the system could be reformed and improved from within; in a word, they were still fighting for socialism but one "with a human face." Therefore, it goes without saying that casting Eastern European culture(s) under communism in terms of a black-and-white struggle between dissident authors and communist party hawks would be, historically, a gross misinterpretation. This is not to say, however, that such sweeping perceptions were uncommon among some Western spectants.

The example of Czechoslovakia shows that the emergence of national counter cultures in Eastern Europe was a complex process which cannot be reduced to the "we" vs. "them" strife. According to Andrew Baruch Wachtel, the author of *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (2006), "rather than seeing a stark contrast between the official and nonofficial literary worlds, it would be better to recognize a continuum between them" (38). In addition, despite some common elements, counter cultures did not follow the same path in all Sovietized states. Thus, in Poland unofficial publishing was much more widespread and tolerated than in Czechoslovakia, while in Romania literary *samizdat*[55] did not exist (Rupnik 208-09). Moreover, to talk about such broad phenomena would require in-depth analyses of each

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[55] The term comes from Russian and denotes the clandestine practice of writing, copying and distributing literature as means of opposing state-controlled culture. Originally, it was used in reference to the Soviet Union, but in time the term expanded to encompass those communist republics where writers expressed themselves through underground publishing.

of the countries—a task which not only goes beyond the scope of the present work, but also surpasses my field of expertise. After all, the aim of image analysis is not to faithfully describe the reality, but rather study how it is rendered. Therefore, in what follows Western and particularly American (cultural) interest in post-war Eastern Europe will be addressed in anticipation of a more detailed analysis of how it was reflected in specific works of literature.

2.5. Meeting the Other (Europe): Western Cultural Encounters with Eastern Europe

According to Yale Richmond, cultural contacts between the Soviet Union and the United States of America played a pivotal role in the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War. Since the 1950s, the struggle for supremacy in military and economic arena extended to the realm of culture. The superpowers engaged in a wide-ranging cultural combat, assuming that the Cold War was above all "a struggle for the minds of men."[56] Throughout the years, the campaign varied in intensity, depending on the current political climate both at home and abroad. Therefore with Senator Joseph McCarthy at the helm, anticommunist crusade reached staggering proportions. In an effort to present American life and institutions in the best light possible, the shelves of American embassy libraries were purged from any works that could jeopardize this image, while a number of American authors were accused of communist views or fellow traveling. In 1953, the year of Joseph Stalin's death, the United States Information Agency (USIA) was founded with the aim of promoting American interests and values abroad. Since the very beginning, USIA's activities had been targeted at

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[56] This is how President Harry Truman described the Cold War in his address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors in 1950 (Pells 65).

achieving political objectives; a role which Richard Pells terms "schizophrenic" (84). On the one hand, the Agency's function was to convey accurate information about life in the United States. On the other, it was supposed to accentuate, even aggrandize those aspects of American culture that could further foreign policy aims. However, until the late 1950s there had been few direct contacts between people separated by the Iron Curtain. Following Stalin's death and subsequent liberalization in the U.S.S.R. under the leadership of Nikita Khrushchev, "a season of dialogue" opened in the U.S.-Soviet cultural relations (Pells 86). The 1958 Agreement for Cultural Exchange, signed between Dwight D. Eisenhower's and Nikita Khrushchev's administrations, inaugurated a period of bilateral exchanges whose official aim was to promote better understanding between the countries and their people. The project involved people-to-people visits, exhibitions, writers' conferences, diplomatic delegations, and university exchanges, among others. Equality, reciprocity, and mutual benefit were the keywords describing the nature of this large-scale cultural venture. However, it is thought that the motives underlying the Agreement were more complex and perhaps less amicable than it had initially appeared. Confidential U.S. State Department documents reveal a specific political strategy behind the exchange: to spread free-world culture in the Soviet empire and the satellite countries with the aim of weakening the international position of communism (Benatov, *Looking* 39-41). Furthermore, under President Kennedy USIA gained recognition and respect, contributing to the shape of American foreign-policy strategies (Pells 69).

Two writers discussed in the present work; John Updike and Joyce Carol Oates, were invited by USIA to travel behind the Iron Curtain as the official ambassadors of American culture. Both later poured their impressions of Eastern Europe onto paper. Moreover, Richmond reports that such prominent writers as John Steinback, E.L.

Doctorow, or Arthur Miller, among others, all traveled to the Soviet Union for political reasons, in order to "end that [Soviet Union's] isolation" ("Cultural" n. pag.). However, there were also authors that visited Eastern Europe privately, like Philip Roth who traveled to Czechoslovakia every spring from 1972 to 1977, or Marcia Davenport who retained a strong relationship with the country during most of her life, and even lived in Prague for a year following the end of the Second World War (Peprník 288). Given this study's concern with the conceptual category of Eastern Europe, the scope has been limited to those authors who visited satellite states. Nevertheless, the Soviet Union will be also discussed as part of American imaginative geographies of Eastern Europe in John Updike's and Joyce Carol Oates's short fiction.

The U.S.-Soviet Exchange Agreement aside, the question remains what attracted Westerners, and particularly Americans, to communist Eastern Europe. According to Stephen Fischer-Galati, prior to the Cold War only a small segment of American society took interest in the distant East-Central parts of Europe. It comprised mainly artists, writers, physicians, journalists, diplomats, academics, as well as members of "the European-oriented 'aristocratic elites'" (365). Importantly, these Americans were attracted mostly to Vienna and, to a lesser degree, Budapest and Prague. It was only during the Cold War that the "'Captive Nations'" of the Sovietized Eastern Europe became "focal to American political interests," reaching "the Forefront of American media exposure" (Fischer-Galati 367). Such landmarks as the 1956 revolution in Hungary, workers' strikes and the Solidarity movement in Poland, or the Prague Spring, not to mention the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, received considerable media coverage in the West and were hailed as the victory of freedom and democracy over Soviet totalitarianism (Fischer-Galati 367). Therefore, one possible reason for exploring Eastern Europe was that world history was taking place there. Among the eyewitnesses

of Eastern Europe's predicament was a British historian, Timothy Garton Ash, who has written extensively about the region's political and cultural situation under communism. Garton Ash, whose perspicacious observations will be evoked in this dissertation several times, remarked that coming to Eastern Europe implied an element of controlled risk: "[t]he Western intellectual tourist enjoys the thrill of being in the front line—in the safe certainty that he will not be shot at. War without tears" (*The Uses* 105). In other words, Westerners traveled to Eastern Europe to see history "in the making" and to experience for a while, and in a relatively safe manner, what it meant to live in the shadow of the Soviet empire. Nevertheless, popular American concern with Eastern Europe should not be exaggerated; for the most part it was intellectuals, in a broad sense of the word, who were responsible for constructing American representations of the area for the sake of others. Fischer-Galati points to two main professional groups which took particular interest in Eastern Europe during the Cold War: members of political establishment, both governmental and non-governmental, as well as academics and journalists. The personal factor of this interest should not be overlooked; many of those who analyzed Eastern European realities professionally had family ties with the area (Fischer-Galati 370). Larry Wolff, for instance, mentions his grandparents who had given him "some sense of personal connection to Eastern Europe" (*Inventing* x). Timothy Garton Ash is married to an East-European, whom he met in West Berlin, while Lonnie Johnson "lived, studied, travelled and worked" in the region for many years and his wife comes from Vienna (vi). The same can be also said about members of the third group of travelers, which is examined in this dissertation—the writers. To give a few examples, Philip Roth's grandparents were Galician Jews; Joyce Carol Oates's grandmother was born in Hungary, while Eva Hoffman left Poland with her family as an adolescent. American representations of the countries belonging to the

category of Eastern Europe were also shaped by contacts with members of Eastern European diasporas settled in the United States, especially in the major urban centers of New York, Chicago or San Francisco (Fischer-Galati 368). Since many of them had left the Old World in flight from Hitler back in the 1930s or were Holocaust survivors, the image of Eastern Europe which they brought to the United States was inevitably scarred by the tragic experience of World War II.

Another reason was perhaps the exoticism of Eastern Europe, vividly expressed by the historian Philip Longworth in the introduction to his study *The Making of Eastern Europe* (1992):

> Imagine a Westerner visiting Eastern Europe for the first time before the Revolution of 1989…Our Western traveller experiences a degree of cultural shock. It does not necessarily strike at once, however (…). The sense of shock tends to creep up on him, as his store of petty observations and experiences accumulate (3).

Although Longworth's traveler comes to Eastern Europe equipped with some pre-conceived ideas and expectations regarding "totalitarian, even tyrannous" government and "curious, even exotic" cities, there is still much to surprise him (3). First of all, Eastern European suburbs are a pitiful sight. The traveler is struck by their "repetitious design and poor construction," and cannot help but admit that they "seem drabber than at home" (3). The same holds true for Eastern European streets which, stripped of neon lights and advertisements, seem bleak and colorless in comparison with the Western ones. The profound gap between the two worlds is not limited to the visual aspect. The Westerner's olfactory system soon registers that in Eastern Europe "smells are more pungent than those he is used to; the pollution is decidedly worse" (3). Moreover, the hotel where the weary traveler hopes to find some comfort and rest offers quite the

contrary: poor restaurant menu, slovenly service, and, to top it all, the first encounter with the notorious plague of Eastern Europe—the pervasive bureaucracy. As for the inhabitants of these outlandish places, their appearance leaves much to be desired, to the point that "some look as if they belong to the nineteenth-century countryside rather than to a modern town" (4). In fact, the whole Eastern Europe seems to be a thing of the past, since "even the mundane sights strike him [the Westerner] just as a shade outdated, as does the somewhat staid, almost Victorian, atmosphere (…). Sometimes he has an uncanny feeling that he has journeyed back in time" (4). Interestingly enough, there is some uncanny resemblance between Longworth's account of the West coming into contact with Eastern Europe and the eighteenth-century perceptions of the region studied by Larry Wolff. After all, was it not Count Philippe de Ségur who felt as if he had moved back in time when crossing the border between Western and Eastern Europe? Longworth freely operates with the conceptual categories of East and West to cast Eastern Europe as "a part of the world that is far stranger than, say Belgium is to an Italian, or West Germany to an Englishman" (4). As a result, Eastern Europe emerges as a liminal space located somewhere at the crossroads between the civilized and the backward: "It is not the Third World, but it is certainly not the Western world either (…) Eastern Europe constitutes a world apart" (4). Moreover, from the perspective of the Western traveler Eastern Europe must be constantly judged against Western standards if any sense is to be made out of it at all. Although Longworth admits that, given the differences in terms of economy, politics, and culture, "it is misleading to view the countries together as an aggregate," he nonetheless conveys an image which stresses commonalities over nuances (6).

Yet, the kind of representation as the one presented above is only part of the region's hetero-image. Had Eastern Europe's appeal consisted solely in such "exotic

shabbiness," Westerners would have hardly been tempted to travel there, let alone pursue its representation in writing. What many an intellectual found appealing in Eastern Europe was its subversive culture. As discussed previously, one of the means of crushing the countries of Eastern Europe was through supplanting individual national cultures with a standardized state-controlled doctrine of socialist realism. This new dogma meant that in theory all expressions of national culture, art, literature, music, and film, were to serve a higher political purpose. Writers who wished to publish officially were to comply with the ideological model of culture as a representation of socialist reality not as it was but as it ought to be.[57] This state-imposed socialist dogma bred counter-cultures in many places of Eastern Europe. The political dimension of culture and the role artists and intellectuals played in the struggle against communism met with Western respect and admiration. According to Garton Ash, the same intellectual tourist looking for a bit of tangible history felt appreciation, excitement, even envy for his colleagues living and working behind the Iron Curtain: "Here is a place where intellectuals matter (…). Here historians make history," he thought (117). Dissident culture was highly thought of in the West, and Eastern European writers received support from their Western counterparts. American authors expressed their solidarity with dissidents by means of open letters, support meetings and conferences, written pieces,[58] fund raising, and reviews of Soviet and Eastern European literature, to name a few examples. Literature from behind the Iron Curtain was read with care and respect—

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[57] The supremacy of communist truth over the artist's individual truth was unceremoniously expressed by József Révai, a Hungarian communist politician in control of the country's cultural life: "In our country, the writer does not have such a "right"…We don't give the writer a free pass, we don't give him the 'freedom' to distort the living truth. We don't accept the thesis that the 'taste and judgment of the writer are superior criteria for what he should write and the way he should do it (...). It is not the state and the people who ought to conform to his taste and judgment; it is the writer who, through work and study, should express solidarity with the construction of socialism" (qtd. in Rupnik 195).

[58] For instance, in 1982 Arthur Miller wrote a monolog entitled *I Think about You a Great Deal* dedicated to Václav Havel. In the monolog, Miller "evokes the connection between all writers who accept a moral outlook, which unites them against the powers that threaten and gives them strength to survive" (Abbotson 198).

unlike the state-imposed propaganda it was thought to show life as it really was and not as it ought to be. Western writers also helped to popularize Eastern European literature through supporting the phenomenon of *tamizdat*, which consisted in smuggling banned works abroad and publishing them officially in the West. One of the key figures of the present work, Philip Roth, is credited with a symbolic "tamizdat mission" of introducing the American audience to the works of some of the best authors of the region. Roth became the chief editor of a Penguin series entitled "Writers from the Other Europe," containing books by the leading writers of Poland and Czechoslovakia, among others.

Some enthusiasts of Eastern European samizdat went so far as to suggest that American literature was inferior to the works written behind the Iron Curtain. Notably, in his 1981 essay "The Archives of Eden," an eminent French-born American critic George Steiner pointed to Eastern Europe as the center of the world's culture:

> It is not the 'creative writing centres,' 'the humanities research institutes' (…) we must look to for what is most compelling and far-reaching in art and ideas. It is to the (…) samizdat magazines and publishing houses (…) of Kraków and of Budapest, of Prague and of Dresden. Here (…) is a reservoir of talent, of unquestioning adherence to the risks and functions of art and original thought on which generations to come will feed (299-300).

The essay is built on the premise that America produced little that can stand up to the artistic achievements of Europe, and Eastern Europe in particular. Steiner disdainfully contrasts American cultural institutions with Eastern European clandestine forms of literary resistance, suggesting that only the latter are worthy of serious attention. The critic implies that the quality of literature depends mostly on the circumstances under which it is produced. Thus, real literature is created where real life is and that in

Steiner's language means persecuted and crushed by the totalitarian regime rather than free-wheeling, like in America: "To arrest [a man] in Prague today because he is giving a seminar on Kant," says Steiner, "is to gauge accurately the status of great literature and philosophy." Then he adds rhetorically: "What text (…) could strike the edifice of American politics? What act of abstract thought really matters at all? Who cares?" (303). In the critic's view, American literature is politically insignificant, and cannot stand the comparison with the works from behind the Iron Curtain, whose authors had to risk their lives for, what he calls, "the obsession that is truth" (303). As I will show later in this work, Steiner's stance was challenged by Philip Roth in his reflections and writings on the dissident culture of Prague.

Indeed, one of the most spectacular accounts of dissident life in the Other Europe came from Czechoslovakia. The vision of degraded artists and intellectuals forced to do menial, often blue-collar jobs caught and held Western imagination:

That window cleaner over there: his thesis was on Wittgenstein. Ask your waiter about Kafka: before his trial, he lectured on *The Trial*. Yes, the nightwatchman is reading Aristotle. Your coal will be delivered by an ordained priest of the Czech brethren. Kiss the milkman's ring: he is your bishop (Garton Ash 57).

In this fragment, Garton Ash poignantly describes the "upside-down" world of Czech intelligentsia populated by philosophers, literature professors and members of clergy who have been made to abandon their professions and take up unskilled jobs instead—a vision that is as dramatic as it is surreal. Milan Kundera's novels like *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980) and *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) contributed to sensitizing the Western public to the dramatic condition of intellectual life under communism. In the latter work, a respected heart surgeon Tomáš loses his job on political grounds and is forced to take up window cleaning, just like thousands of

other "Czech painters, philosophers, and writers" who, following the Russian invasion of 1968, "had been relieved of their positions and become window washers, parking attendants, night watchmen, boilermen in public buildings, or at best—and usually with pull—taxi drivers" (Kundera, *The Unbearable* 206).

Given the above examples, I would like to foreground the image of dissident life behind the Iron Curtain as something of a leitmotiv in Western perception of Eastern Europe at the time, and a potent presence in literary representations of the area. Similar status was enjoyed by the phenomenon of samizdat, hailed by George Steiner as the source of the best, high-spirited literature of the time. It is no coincidence that the first question that Philip Roth addressed to Ivan Klíma in an interview conducted one year after the fall of communism concerned the influence of samizdat on the literary culture of Czechoslovakia (Roth, *Shop* 50). Even though, as argued in this dissertation, Philip Roth largely resisted the temptation to narrate Eastern Europe in terms of a simplistic East-West divide, his interest in samizdat signals a broader Western fascination with the phenomenon. Along similar lines, Garton Ash writes about an Eastern European brand of social gathering— "a samizdat party"—where instead of "flowers or wine, the guests bring twenty copies of their latest text" (146). The emblematic status of subversive literary culture is also alluded to in one of John Updike's short stories discussed in this dissertation. During his visit to Czechoslovakia, an American author Henry Bech is invited to a dissident meeting where the American ambassador turns to banned authors with an urgent, if slightly ironic request: "Show Bech a book" Let's show our famous American author some *samizdat*!" (*The Complete* 317).

In his analysis of Roth's personal and professional involvement with Czechoslovakia, Joseph Benatov suggests that Western and especially American representations of Eastern Europe were heavily influenced by the activity of émigré

writers living and publishing in the West. The figure of a dissident, usually male author, forced to leave his home country and settle abroad epitomized the extent to which communism wielded power over intellectuals' minds, compelling them to emigrate rather than conform to the regime. Benatov singles out Milan Kundera as one of "the most prominent molders" of what he terms *pervasive tamizdat mentality*: Western conceptualization of Eastern Europe as a land of perpetual suffering and oppression ("Demystifying" 121). Benatov employs the term "tamizdat" figuratively to allude to the "celebrity" status which authors like Kundera enjoyed in the West, in compliance with the dominant narrative of Soviet tyranny over the captive nations of Eastern Europe. Indeed Kundera's works are credited with poetic representation of harsh political realities imposed on Eastern European culture. Critical reception of these works in the United States fixed Kundera as a predominantly political and erotic writer. As Klara Lutsky observed, most Western critics have tended to interpret Kundera's works through the lens of his dissident status (118). John Updike, for instance, juxtaposed Kundera's life in the throes of history and "the life histories of most American writers," which in comparison "look as stolid as the progress of a tomato plant" ("The Most" n. pag.). However, Kundera did not enjoy the same appreciation on the other side of the Iron Curtain. His decision to leave Czechoslovakia and pursue his writing career in France brought mixed feelings from his compatriots. The writer was accused of writing "for the West," and losing ties with his native country. When asked about Czechs' disapprobation of Kundera's "internationalism," Ivan Klíma spoke about something of an "allergy" to Kundera's "simplified and spectacular way" of presenting Czech experience (Roth, *Shop* 55). Notwithstanding, there is no denying that émigré authors like Kundera, Czesław Miłosz, or Canada-based Josef Škvorecký not only

helped to popularize literature from the Other Europe, but also directed the attention of Western intellectuals toward the conditions under which it had been produced.

In fact, Kundera is the author of a key text aimed at opening Western eyes to the tragedy of Sovietization that befell his homeland and other traditionally West-oriented nations. At the same time, Kundera was also one of the advocates of the intellectual idea of *Central Europe*, which emerged in the 1980s, and which I briefly mentioned earlier in this chapter. I wish to dedicate some attention to the writer's argument, as it is later reflected in my analysis of American literary representations of Eastern Europe.

Kundera's "Central Europe" is neither a geographical macroregion nor a political construct, but rather a collective cultural identity which for centuries has evolved in symbiosis with Western Europe. According to Kundera's Central European imaginative geography, Russia cannot be accommodated within Europe because it constitutes "a singular civilization" which "knows another (greater) dimension of disaster, another image of space (…), another sense of time (…), another way of laughing, living, and dying" ("The Tragedy" 4). In other words, Russia simply does not partake in Central European culture: its achievements, patterns and struggles. Kundera seems to be aware of his own mental mapping, for he asserts that Central European borders are "imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation" and the entity itself is not a "state," but rather "a culture or a fate" ("The Tragedy" 6). Even though Central Europe is "only" an idea or a state of mind, it is still an extremely rich and appealing one. It houses some of the most illustrious minds of all times; Haydn, Freud, Bartok, Kafka and Gombrowicz all belong to a rich cultural melting pot of Central Europe.[59] As mentioned in the introduction, I do not envisage a

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[59] Similar argument as the one developed by Kundera was put forward by Polish émigré writer Czesław Miłosz. Like Kundera, Miłosz admits that Central Europe is hardly a geographical notion. Instead, it is more like "an act of faith, a project, (…) a utopia" ("About Our Europe" 107). Its defining feature is a unique culture fueled by centuries of turbulent and ethnic diversity. Miłosz even goes as far as

dialog between Kundera's conception of Central Europe and the literary representations of Eastern Europe analyzed in this dissertation. However, I argue that Central European culture shines through Eastern European drabness in John Updike's short stories, particularly "Bech in Czech," and Philip Roth's writings on Prague.

Yet, if being a Central European is a source of pride, it is also a tragic destiny: "[b]oxed in by the Germans on one side and the Russians on the other, the nations of Central Europe have used up their strength in the struggle to survive and to preserve their languages" (Kundera, "The Tragedy" 5). For Kundera, it is the Jews of Central Europe that epitomize the region's cultural richness and its tragic fate; a long record of small nations' struggle, resistance and subjugation. Importantly, cultural memory of the Second World War and the Holocaust features prominently also in the American post-war image of Eastern Europe, as traced in the next section and discussed in the following chapters. Along the lines of Kundera's essay, "Jewish presence in absence"[60] embodies the region's painful past in the writings of Updike, Oates, and Roth.

The idea of Central Europe acquires more political connotations in the writings of flagship Eastern European thinkers and political activists: Adam Michnik, György Konrád, and Václav Havel (Garton Ash 170-75). Central European mindset finds its political expression in the idea of civil society based on strong ethical values, non-violence and the principle of "living in truth," propagated by Havel as an antithesis of the communist regime of lies. In turn, these qualities lie at the heart of political activism in Eastern Europe, notably Polish Solidarity grass-roots movement (Garton Ash 175). In sum, the intellectual idea of Central Europe brings together a number of elements. It

to assert a common literary identity distinguished by a profound awareness of the past, which is always lurking in the background, and a different sense of time: "intense, spasmodic, full of surprises; indeed practically an active participant in the story." This is because, says Miłosz, "time is associated with a danger that threatens the existence of a national community to which the writer belongs" ("About Our Europe" 100).

[60] I have borrowed this poignant turn of phrase from the title of a recent volume: *The Jewish Presence in Absence: The Aftermath of the Holocaust in Poland, 1944–2010* (2014), edited by Feliks Tych and Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska.

stands for a common cultural identity; a shared spirit expressed through art and literature, but also a political mindset oriented toward democratic ideals and values. The essence of Central Europe, as well as its singular appeal, is best embodied by such "philosopher-kings" as Havel, who combined artistry with political insight—a potent and unlikely combination which inspired awe and respect among Western intellectuals. Therefore, my proposition is that to speak about Western cultural image of Eastern Europe under communism is to acknowledge several coexistent narratives. On the one hand, Eastern Europe stands for a homogenous Sovietized block; a place so *un-Western* in its shabbiness that it bears no comparison with the rest of Europe not to mention the U.S. As shown in Philip Longworth's account, it is an exotic realm where time flows differently, and which makes little sense unless a Western blueprint is used to interpret it. It is also a land of oppression and suffering, where ordinary people live in constant fear of the Soviet hegemony. But there also exists another Eastern Europe, or rather Central Europe—a realm of rich culture nurtured by complex history and ethnic diversity, known only to a small segment of Western society. This cultural space is capable of accommodating Kafka's Prague, Mozart's Vienna, but also Jewish *shtetls* in Poland, and the fairy tale-like Ottoman spires of Budapest. Despite its apparent Soviet-imposed uniformity, it still has the air of the "Old World." But this Eastern Europe is also deeply scarred by history, for it is where some of the worst nightmares of the twentieth century came true. Populated by dissident intellectuals and political activists, it is a place where life has a distinctively political dimension; a place where one might actually see history in the making.

As the above discussion has hopefully demonstrated, the idea of Eastern Europe transcends the Cold-War context. Larry Wolff has shown that there is a far-reaching tradition of imaginative geographies behind it. Eastern Europe has long been subjected

to external and internal mental mappings, which are manifested in varied nomenclature, reflecting different, often clashing, perceptions of this contested space. As a result, the task of defining what it stands for is challenging if not outright impossible. Any definition is bound to be reductionist as it accounts for only part of the picture. Similarly, no designation seems to be capable of straddling the complexity of this "territory where peoples, cultures, languages are fantastically intertwined, where every place has several names and men change their citizenship as often as their shoes" (Garton Ash 169). Throughout this chapter, I have referred to the space under discussion as liminal. It seems to me that the concept of liminality and especially the idea of liminal space are particularly fitting in the context of Eastern Europe as analyzed in this dissertation. As shown in chapter 1, liminality encapsulates the condition of being ambiguous, contradictory and thus hard to define. Liminal spaces tend to be elusive and leak through the fingers of those who try to judge them according to rigid definitions. The quality of marginality is often associated with threshold areas, but at the same time their structurelessness is strangely appealing. In what follows, I set to discuss those American works of literature whose authors responded to this appeal by traveling to Eastern Europe under communism and in the years following the lifting of the Iron Curtain. I hope to show that the literary images that ensued entertain ambiguity and contradiction, while at the same time reflecting specific national and individual concerns of the authors. Thus, my task is that of an imagologist: to analyze the American image of Eastern Europe as negotiated through literature and find out what it reveals about the spected and the spectant. To prepare the ground for my analysis, I set out to trace some prior representations of the region in American literature. This, I hope, will give my imagological project a sense of continuity and, above all, allow me to

figure out to what extent the Cold-War images of Eastern Europe reflected the existent cultural mappings.

2.6. Imagining Eastern Europe in American literature

One of the crucial tasks of an imagologist is to identify the tradition behind a given national trope and examine how it is reflected in the text under analysis. In the case of communist Eastern Europe, this task is more complex. First of all, we do not deal with a single country but a group of diverse nations bound together by a common experience of communism. Although the image of communist Eastern Europe hides traces of the enlightened philosophic geography, this geopolitical construct was consolidated only in the second half of the twentieth century, which means that there is hardly a tradition of representation to talk about. This might be one of the reasons why a 1995 collection of essays edited by a renowned imagologist Waldemar Zacharasiewicz is concerned with the images of *Central* rather than Eastern Europe in American literature. Although the collection contains several works on American representation of the Eastern Bloc countries, its scope is broader, both geographically and time-wise, covering "the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and its successor states" plus Germany (Zacharasiewicz, Introduction xiv). Accordingly, the collected essays trace American visions of Northern parts of Italy, Germany, Switzerland, and Croatia, as well as Poland, Hungary, and Czechia, among others. Interestingly, the first imagological essay in the volume is Wolff's account of John Ledyard's travels in Poland in the eighteenth century, which symbolically marks the departure point for other studies, and which I have used to open my discussion on the meaning and shape of Eastern Europe. In what follows, I will pay particular attention to those nation-states which populate the fictional

maps of the American authors discussed in this dissertation. These are Czechoslovakia, Poland, Hungary, and, to a lesser extent Bulgaria, Romania, and Germany. I will also briefly mention the image of Russia/Soviet Union. While I am aware of the influence which Cold-War cinematic productions and spy fiction exerted on representations of the Soviet Union and its satellites in the American popular imaginary, I have decided not to include them in the following sketch, owing to the fact they have little bearing on the travels and works explored in this dissertation. Notwithstanding, certain elements of spy-novel scenarios are present in the stories under discussion, attesting to the genre's far-reaching cultural impact and its capacity to capture something of the Cold-War Zeitgeist.[61]

Early American representations of the Old World are indebted to European migrants. John Smith's account of his impressions of the East-Central parts of Europe, *True Travels, Adventures and Observations* (1630), provided a source of knowledge of places unknown to his countrymen (Zacharasiewicz, Introduction xii). National images inherited from the European forefathers were often tinged by the New World ideology "foregrounding the vices of the Old World at the expense of its virtues" (Stanzel 7). Thus to talk about *purely* American representations at the time seems to be inaccurate, for these were informed by the European tradition of othering. Even Ledyard, whom Larry Wolff calls "a founding father of the tradition of exploration in independent America," drew freely on the "English engagement with the world in the eighteenth century" ("Between" 12). Consequently, his vision of Poland as suspended between Asiatic backwardness and European manners smoothly inscribed itself into the discourse of the Enlightenment's philosophic geography, which imagined Eastern Europe as a liminal space on the threshold of East and West. Similarly, Benjamin

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[61] For the discussion of the genre's development from the perspective of twentieth-century politics, please consult Brett F. Woods's *Neutral Ground: A Political History of Espionage Fiction* (2007).

Franklin wrote about Habsburg Vienna from the perspective of his formative years spent in diplomatic service in Western Europe, as well as the auto-image of America that he constructed largely *in absentia* (Conley 35-36). As for imperial Russia, David C. Engerman observes that "American scholars built their visions of Russia from imported material," particularly nineteenth-century French studies on the tsarist empire (13).

In the nineteenth century, Americans visited the continent in larger numbers. Antebellum travel writing was strongly marked by the feeling of nationalism, and the foreign setting served to show appreciation for the homeland and bring out American virtues (Bendixen 104). A review of major American travel books written before the Civil War reveals, unsurprisingly, that the American imaginative geography of Europe was quite restricted, focusing mostly on Western and Southern parts of the continent (Bendixen 103-26). Countries lying in East-Central Europe were largely unknown and rarely visited. This is how essayist Donald Grant Mitchell introduced Hungary to his American readers: "South and East of Vienna, stretches a great and fertile country, little known to the trading world and (…) little-known to the reading world" (213). If Americans ventured beyond the beaten track it was to travel to German-speaking parts of Europe, particularly the Rhineland, whose romanticized representation can be found in the fiction of James Fenimore Cooper and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, among others. Interestingly, Vienna rarely formed part of the American travel itinerary before the Civil War. It was not until Nathaniel Parker Willis proclaimed the city as a "Paris of Germany" in his romantic tale *A Bandit of Austria* (1840) that something of a hetero-image of Vienna as the wellspring of music and a general *joie de vivre* began to assume form in the American imaginary (Zacharasiewicz, "Masks" 348).

The Civil War is regarded as a watershed in American travel: "From the decade following the Civil War to the early years of the twenty-first century (…) women as

well as men, old as well as young, have penetrated every corner of Europe and recorded their experience in a multitude of contexts and narrative forms" (Merrill Decker 127). Nevertheless, until the twentieth century the East-Central parts of Europe, with the exception of above-mentioned Germany and Austria appear to be largely missing from imaginative maps of the best American travel authors. According to Jaroslav Peprník, while the U.S. has been in the limelight of Czech attention since the mid-nineteenth century, Czechs attracted American interest only when they "made 'some noise in the world'" a century later (283). Peprník even argues that a detailed hetero-image of Czechs is present in the works of only three American authors, one of them being Philip Roth. Similarly, Tibor Frank lists solely five American books concerned with pre-World War II Hungary, attesting to the minor position these nations held in American travel writing (193). Conversely, Thomas S. Gladsky observes that a vivid hetero-image of Poland was firmly established already in the nineteenth century as a consequence of American–Polish political ties. Particularly the figures of Thaddeus Kosciuszko and Casimir Pulaski, who fought for freedom and independence both in Poland and in the United States of America, shaped the American vision of the Pole as "brave, patriotic, genteel, high-minded" in other words a European aristocrat—a stereotype that was as flattering as it was one-sided (Gladsky 12). Generally, however, it seems that American eyes rested on this part of Europe indeed only when it generated some "noise" on the international arena. The first half of the twentieth century provided many occasions for Eastern Europe to be heard—albeit it was mostly a dramatic cry for help. The U.S. involvement in the Great War, which had been known as the European War prior to 1917, marked a change in American attitude to Europe as a whole. Before, Americans looked up to Europe as the center of world history and culture. Burdened by the complex of the New World's thin cultural heritage, great American writers like Henry

James traveled to Europe to "inhale (…) a general sense of *glory*" (James, *A Small Boy* 275). America's role in World War I recast the country's status, turning it into a vital ally of the battle-scarred Europe, which in time would assume the dominant position within global politics. The twentieth-century war theater transformed American-European relations and this dramatic change was to be reflected in mutual perceptions and images. Thus, Edith Wharton's account of the war landscape in France constitutes a sharp departure from her earlier vision of Europe as "a more or less catalogued museum storehouse" (Merrill Decker 132). When the war broke out, American journalist John Reed traveled to England, France, Switzerland, Italy, Germany, and Belgium to witness the fighting. A year later he undertook a journey to "Eastern Europe."[62] According to Reed's imaginative geography, Eastern Europe consisted of Salonika, Serbia, Russia, Constantinople and "the Burning Balkans" (Romania, Bulgaria, Serbia, revisited by the author, and Greece). Although Reed places Romania within the Balkans, he is quick to note the natives' identification with the Latin world, and their refusal to be addressed as "Balkan." Accordingly, Reed endows a typical Romanian with somewhat modified Latin traits: "He is lazy like a Spaniard, but without a Spaniard's flavour; skeptical and libertine, like a Frenchman, but without a Frenchman's taste; melodramatic and emotional, like an Italian, but without Italian charm" (300). The description pointedly illustrates how well-known nations of Europe served as a yardstick to represent those more obscure. Importantly, Reed's representation of the country contains a reference to Romanian belief in vampires. Although the name Dracula is not mentioned, the work being after all a wartime journalistic report, the Transylvania place myth is firmly there. Reed's impression of Bulgarians is much more favorable. No doubt it has to do with the fact the Bulgaria has a lot in common with his homeland: the capital city, Sofia,

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[62] *The War in Eastern Europe* (1916).

resembles "a bustling new city of the Pacific Northwest," many people speak English, while most Bulgarian politicians have been educated at "the American missionary school in Constantinople" (312).[63]

Although in Reed's eyes there is much that divides these two neighboring countries, they are both classified as belonging to the Balkans—a complex hetero-image in itself. While unfavorable stereotypes of the Balkans had already been present in the nineteenth century, it was not until the beginning of the next century that they turned into fixed formulas. As a result of the Balkan wars (1912-1913) and the Great War, the name "Balkan" and particularly its derivative, "balkanization," acquired highly negative connotations. The fact that World War I commenced with the assassination of the Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a terrorist from Sarajevo "left an indelible mark" on all subsequent representations of the region (Todorova, *Imagining* 118). Similarly, "balkanization"[64] came to denote the process of state fragmentation and political instability, as well as regression to the primitive and the backward.

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Great War and Bolshevism made American eyes turn eastward in the direction of the newly-established empire—the Soviet Union. Many prominent Americans, such as previously mentioned John Reed, Louise Bryant, W.E.B. Du Bois, Edmund Wilson, Claude McKay, or Langston Hughes traveled to Soviet Russia driven by the desire to eyewitness and comprehend the emerging Soviet model. It was at the beginning of the revolutionary twentieth

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[63] In *Imagining the Balkans*, Todorova points to American nineteenth-century missionary enterprise as an important source of contacts with Southeast Europe (105).

[64] Although the term was used to describe the disintegration of the Habsburg and the Romanov Empire into a number of smaller states following the Great War, it should be noted that the actual secession of Balkan states had started much earlier, already in the 19th century. The image of fragmented nation-states in violent conflict with one another proved to be so powerful that in 1993 an American report on the conflict in Yugoslavia drew a parallel between the current crisis and the Balkan wars from the start of the century. Not only did the report bear the meaningful name of "The Other Balkan Wars," but also reprinted a 1913 document on the causes of the Balkan crisis (Todorova, *Imagining*).

century that Russia's image as America's mirror came into being: "For American travelers, the USSR represented one vast mystery, a marginally European nation extending deep into Asia, undertaking a political experiment on a grand American scale" (Merrill Decker 136). During the Cold-War period this trope would give way to a metaphor of an inverted or distorted mirror image, encompassing not just Soviet Russia but the satellite countries of Eastern Europe.

Nevertheless, American hetero-images of Russia had been formed earlier. As mentioned before, by the late nineteenth century American politicians and intellectuals were emulating Western European views on tsarist Russia as oppressive and backward. Concomitantly, works by great Russian novelists, Lev Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky fueled a different kind of stereotype—a romantic vision of timeless Russia populated by "fabulously wealthy aristocrats, wild Cossacks, noble nihilists, beautiful prima ballerinas, bomb-throwing revolutionaries, and picturesquely downtrodden folk" (Chatterjee and Holmgren, Introduction 3). Before he denounced the Soviet system and became an advocate of the policy of containment, George F. Kennan entertained similarly ambivalent notions of Russia. As Frank Costigliola reveals in "Kennan Encounters Russia, 1933-1937," although the diplomat never believed in Soviet communism he was nonetheless fascinated with some communist intellectuals and infatuated with the Russian people who seemed to him earthy and unspoiled (60). Along similar lines, Harrison Salisbury, an American journalist and the author of an epic work on the siege of Leningrad, *The 900 days* (1969), celebrated a romantic vision of Russia held captive by the brutal system. In her essay on Salisbury, Lisa A. Kirschenbaum argues that in *The 900 Days* he combined an image of "an exalted victimized, often feminized 'real' Russia and a devious, authoritarian, bureaucracy" in order to create "a Cold War epic that at once mythologized the siege and exposed the terrors of the

Stalinist state" (74). According to the scholar, Salisbury fell in love with Russia whose essence was for him embodied by a strong, passionate, eternal Russian woman; sophisticated and homely at once (73). Such a romantic hetero-image of Russia has long been present in American popular culture. In Choi Chatterjee's assessment, from the late nineteenth century fervent criticism of political systems of imperial Russia and then the Soviet Union coexisted with "Americans' desire for the Russian other [which] was often expressed through the trope of transnational romance" with a Russian revolutionary (87). As I will show, some of these persistent, long-standing hetero-images of Russia are replicated also in the works discussed in this dissertation.

The Great War complicated the American picture of Europe, but it was Hitler's war that "set Europe beyond the bounds of tragic understanding" (Merrill Decker 136). As the historian Richard Pells observes, even though World War I had debilitated the old continent, Europe remained at the helm of the Western world both in terms of politics and culture. Particularly American writers, artists, musicians and scientists continued traveling to Europe in search of knowledge, ideas, and inspiration. However, the imaginative geography of interwar Europe remained quite limited, with Paris as the dominant presence. If East-Central Europe came into focus it was mostly through literary engagements with Austria and Germany (Merril Decker 134-35). It was the advent of World War II that came to shape American perceptions of what was to become Cold-War Eastern Bloc, impregnating the image with some of the darkest shades imaginable. As the next chapter will demonstrate, although the spread of communism re-invented the continent, casting Eastern Europe as the extension of the Soviet Union, American representations of this new reality were, and still are, deeply informed by the region's tragic war-time experience and the memory of the Holocaust. While immigrant literature had long shaped American perceptions of ethnic minorities

from the East-Central parts of Europe, it is the immigrant-survivor kind of fiction (not necessarily written by actual survivors) that firmly placed nations like Poland on the American literary map. As Thomas S. Gladsky observes, since World War II, Poles, who had largely disappeared in the melting pot of American society, gained visibility through post-war Jewish-American literature (179). There is a disturbing duality to the way Eastern Europe functions in the Jewish-American imaginary, for it represents both the cradle and the grave of the Ashkenazi culture and tradition. The former paradigm was immortalized in the fiction of Isaac B. Singer. Singer escaped the Holocaust by coming to the United States in 1935. His vision of Eastern Europe encompasses a traditional Jewish microcosm of the *shtetl*, Judaism, folk tradition and the Old-World magic—the world which had been obliterated by the Nazis. It is only in his later works that Singer depicts Jews in America, many of them being Holocaust survivors (Goffman 4). The contrast between life before and after the Shoah is conveyed, among others, in the works of Edward Lewis Wallant, where the Old-World pre-Holocaust past blends with the flashbacks of concentration-camp horrors, and the immigrant life in America (Davis 268-77). Eastern Europe's image in the American literary imaginary is further complicated by the problem of anti-Semitism. Jewish-American authors like Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow, or Philip Roth infused the image of the Pole, which has encompassed such diverse figures as the nineteenth-century beau ideal and a brutish Stan Kowalski-like immigrant, with anti-Semitic connotations, casting him as "a symbol of the duplicity and hostility of the Christian world and of the complexities of Old World minorities" (Gladsky 191). Eastern-European anti-Semitism is also dramatized in the works of Polish-born American author Jerzy Kosiński. In his best-known work, *The Painted Bird* (1965), the worst of Eastern Europe: Jew-hatred, ignorance and mindless violence, are engendered by Polish peasants. Although the

writer tended to obliterate the setting of his novels, "the Holocaust, Jewishness, the Soviets, and Poland are never out of Kosiński's mind nor far away even from his seemingly American protagonists" (Gladsky 167). An interesting example of non-ethnic Holocaust fiction is William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* (1979). Both the novel and its film version by Alan J. Pakula were highly successful in the U.S. and thus contributed to shaping the idea of Poland in the American imaginary.[65] Given the novel's impact, I wish to dedicate some attention to Styron's representation of the country and its implications for my argument.

Although the action of the novel takes place mainly in New York City, the intricate, multi-plot story features memories of Sophie Zawistowska, a Polish Auschwitz survivor. Sophie's vision of her native Cracow falls within a larger framework of rich Central European culture, which Kundera appealed to in his essay "The Tragedy of Central Europe." In this auto-image, which is paradoxically also a hetero-image, for it is the novel's American narrator who delivers it to the reader, Cracow is cast as the city of art and music, highly reminiscent of Habsburg Vienna. It is in Cracow that Sophie spends the happiest years of her life, enfolded in the tender embrace of her gentle, educated and music-loving parents. This dreamy vision contrasts sharply with the place that lies just thirty miles away from Cracow—the Auschwitz Concentration Camp, where Sophie is an inmate. Styron's intention in making Sophie a non-Jew was to stress the universality of the Holocaust, which encompassed several ethnic groups (Gladsky 153). However, as the story progresses, it becomes clear that Sophie was not only victim but also an accomplice, assuming the role of an anti-Semite to ingratiate herself with the camp commandant. Furthermore, it turns out that her life in Cracow was far from idyllic because of her staunchly anti-Semitic father, whose sick

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[65] For an analysis of the novel in the context of American hetero-stereotypes of Germans, including the familiar imageme of "inhuman intellectuals" please consult Waldemar Zacharasiewicz's "The Burden of the Past: Post-War Germany" in *American Images of Germany* (2007).

mind had conceived the *final solution* even before the Nazis did. Although Sophie is not condemned—her deeds pertaining to the "grey zone" of wartime moral ambiguity—she is constantly abused by her Jewish lover, who, though unaware of Sophie's real camp existence, fixes her in the cultural representation of a Jew-hating Polack. Interestingly, Nathan believes that his Jewishness gives him the right to be an ultimate "authority on anguish and suffering;" another highly polemical auto-image, further complicated by the man's mental problems which make him approach ethnicity in sharply black-and-white terms (Styron 161). Ultimately, Styron's novel toys with several auto- and hetero-images, which together make up an intricate web of historical truth, clichés, prejudice, and misconceptions;[66] a dense subtext of cultural representations of Eastern European alterity in post-war America.

Although Germany is implicitly embedded in American representations of post-war Eastern Europe explored in this dissertation, only Joyce Carol Oates depicts Berlin in her short stories. Accordingly, specific cultural imagery regarding post-war Berlin as a divided city will be addressed in the chapter devoted to the author. At this point, I only wish to comment briefly on American hetero-images of Germany in the years following the Second World War. In his imagological study of American representations of Germany since early nineteenth century until the post-war period, Waldemar Zacharasiewicz points out that "[t]he breach with the Soviets not only led to the inclusion of West Germany in Western defense strategy toward the Soviet Bloc, but also ushered in a new evaluation of the Germans" (*Images of Germany* 140). However, this positive representation of (West) Germans as competitive, industrious and cultured

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[66] While the novel was hugely successful in the United States, its reception in Poland was less enthusiastic. As Andréa Bernard and Elzbieta H. Oleksy pointed out, Polish criticism of historical inaccuracies in the novel signals a larger issue—Styron's unjust treatment of two crucial cultural constructs through the character of Sophie Zawistowska: Polish heroism during World War II and the paragon of motherhood; the so-called *Matka Polka*, who is a "preserver of national identity" and a "propagator of Polishness" (262).

was reflected mainly in travel and nonfiction works. From the 1960s onward the vision of Germany mediated by American fiction was infused with dark and gruesome imagery inspired by the recent Nazi past of the country. As for the post-war division of the nation, Zacharasiewicz does not discuss any works concerned explicitly with East Germany, but he notes that "[i]n connection with the rearmament of East Germany in the Soviet sphere of influence the image of the ugly German was transferred to the Soviet zone and the later German Democratic Republic" (*Images* of *Germany* 217). Indeed Oates's short stories dramatize the internal breach by focusing on the Berlin Wall as a liminal site of danger and possibility and picturing East Germany as a dystopian space of captivity.

As mentioned earlier, by the end of World War II the balance of power shifted dramatically from Europe to America:

> The United States was exploding with energy and optimism: The future would surely be America's to shape and define. Europe, on the other hand, was wrecked, exhausted, finished as an international force—its influence and glory, its claim to represent the best in human civilization, all obliterated by the war and the gas chambers (Pells 38).

If early American authors traveled to Europe to preach the gospel of patriotism, post-war U.S. citizens were similarly filled with the ideal of American democracy and freedom—a staggering contrast to the dark forces of Nazism that have razed the old continent. However, such works as F.O. Matthiessen's *From the Heart of Europe* (1948) prove that political idealism was in for a failure in the face of the Soviet-brand of communism. In 1947, Matthiessen, who is regarded as one of the founding fathers of American Studies, traveled to Austria and Czechoslovakia to teach American literature as part of the Salzburg Seminar initiative aimed at promoting American culture in post-

war Europe. Interestingly, his point of departure was not the official anti-communist U.S. discourse but rather a vision of democracy conceived as a middle way between the Soviet and American systems (Merrill Decker 137). Thinking in imagological terms, Matthiessen's image of Czechoslovakia bears certain resemblance to his perception of the United States of America. Not only are both nations founded on similar principles, but their citizens are characterized by equal devotion to freedom (Sparling 294-95).[67] In hindsight, Matthiessen's political vision seems to be a case of extreme political naïveté. Only two months after he had left Prague, communists staged a coup which determined Czechoslovakia's future for the next forty years, blotting out any possibility of the kind of political hybrid Matthiessen had envisaged. Nevertheless, in a sense, Matthiessen's deep-rooted American idealism reaching back to the Declaration of Independence, anticipates the U.S. project of instilling American values in the Soviet-infected Europe—the cultural Cold War. Although the first Salzburg Seminar was not a governmental initiative, in time American Studies became an integral part of the U.S. cultural diplomacy. For obvious reasons, the discipline's impact on the countries behind the Iron Curtain was limited to the study of literature. Courses on American belles lettres were permitted, but communists supplied reading lists dominated by those authors whose representation of the United States of America was in sync with the Stalinist vision of "exploitation, injustice, inequality, and decadence that afflicted the American people under capitalism" (Pells 143). Since the late 1950s contacts between American and Eastern European scholars increased in frequency. In 1959 professor

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[67] This desire to search for, not necessarily positive, affinities between America and the spected is present also in other works of the time. For instance, James A. Michener's bestselling novel *Poland* (1983) celebrates American traits of freedom, democracy, and civil rights in Poland of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Gladsky 159). In Styron's *Sophie's Choice*, Poland is compared to the American South, both sharing a schizophrenic attitude to race: "cruelty and compassion, bigotry and understanding, enmity and fellowship, exploitation and sacrifice, searing hated and hopeless love" (580). Along similar lines, in Saul Bellow's *The Dean's December* (1982) dehumanized living conditions of communist Bucharest in the 1980s provide a foil to Chicago's own social malaise.

Franciszek Lyra became the first Polish Fulbright in the U.S.[68] Two years later Daniel Aaron, a distinguished Americanist, went to Poland as the first American Fulbright in the country. In his 2007 memoir, Aaron vividly describes the mental image of Poland he had held before coming to the country:

My picture of Poland had been compounded from a mix of fact, fiction, and imagination. A large number of my fellow citizens in Northampton, Massachusetts, as I've said, were the children and grandchildren of Polish immigrants, and Galician Polish could be heard on Main Street and in the fields and orchards east of the Connecticut River where, for several summers, I had suckered tobacco plants, weeded onions, cut asparagus, and harvested apples for Polish-American farmers. But Poland was for me a phantasmagorical map dotted with unpronounceable names, a blood-drenched land in the Eastern fens, comprised of dark forests, fields of sugar beets, burning ghettos, and obscene encampments stacked with human hair and children's shoes. I had chosen Poland over Hawaii (where I had also been invited), because my visa to Russia never came. I wanted to know what it was like to live in a Communist society. Warsaw lacked palm trees, but it was said to be au courant. Polish movies were in vogue. Friends returning from brief visits spoke enthusiastically of the Warsaw scene, of sopping up vodka and gossip at the bar of the Bristol Hotel with avant-garde artists and intellectuals (104-05).

I have quoted Aaron at length, because I find his observations particularly revealing in the context of the present discussion. Aaron's perception of Poland comprehends some of the crucial elements of the American cultural representation of Eastern Europe, which I have outlined in this and the previous section. The scholar

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[68] Professor Lyra graciously recommended several works which proved to be of much help during the writing of this dissertation.

acknowledges that his image of the country has been shaped by several narratives. Growing up in Northampton Massachusetts, he was surrounded by American Poles and had a taste of their "unpronounceable" language. However, it is the turbulent history of the region ("blood-drenched land," "burning ghettos and obscene encampments stacked with human hair and children's shoes") that functions as the dominant subtext of Aaron's mental image. Aaron's decision to travel to Poland rather than Hawaii reflects Western interest in the life under communism. Despite the lack of "palm trees," Warsaw with its "avant-garde artists and intellectuals" is said to be "au courant;" in other words, a fashionable place to be. At the same time, Aaron hints at the marginal status of Poland, as opposed to Russia, which, as we are led to assume, would be more fascinating.

American views of Eastern Europe during this period support imagology's claim that national representations are closely linked to international politics. As Fischer-Galati pointed out, it was during the Cold War that Eastern Europe entered the orbit of America's political interest, which was tantamount to attracting considerable public attention. In the previous section, I have outlined some of the strategies and institutions which had been instrumental in the project of propagating American lifestyle and culture behind the Iron Curtain. Although American writing about Eastern Europe can hardly be extracted from the broader framework of Cold-War cultural politics, the following discussion does not approach the selected works from the perspective of the Soviet-American cultural combat. This project has been successfully accomplished by Joseph Benatov in his doctoral dissertation: *Looking in the Iron Mirror: Eastern Europe in the American Imaginary, 1958-2001* (2008). While I am well-aware of the political background against which these works were produced, I propose to read them through the methodological lenses outlined at the beginning of this chapter. Therefore, I adopt

the vocabulary provided by the field of imagology to accurately describe the representation of Eastern Europe in the American literary imaginary. That said I do not lose from sight the interdependence between the Cold-War dynamics and American images of Eastern European alterity. Neither do I overlook the extent to which Cold-War images of Eastern Europe are informed by cultural representations of the region, particularly those related to World War II. Bearing in mind Ledyard's concept of philosophic geography, as well as its contemporary incarnation—Said's imaginative geography, I set out to study how this large geographical locale is mapped in the American travel-inspired writing under discussion, and how these mappings reflect American interests and concerns at the time. Given the fact that most of the works discussed in this dissertation are variations on the genre of travel or expat writing, I interpret these transatlantic journeys in terms of transitory experience, where Eastern Europe serves as a liminal space of danger and possibility, a contact zone between cultures and, potentially, the site of individual transformative experience. In addition, my liminal reading of Eastern Europe establishes a dialog with Larry Wolff's account of the project of mapping Eastern Europe by the eighteenth-century intellectual travelers. I propose that Eastern Europe seen through the eyes of the contemporary American authors continues to function as an intermediate space oscillating between contradictory narratives, closely bound up with the various vicissitudes of post-war America. By combining these diverse yet interconnected strands I hope to offer a reading which accounts for the complexity of the area in question, without forgetting that it is the representation not reality that I am after.

The three authors, whose works I set out to study in the following chapters, are regarded as some of the finest and most prolific American writers. John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates, and Philip Roth were all born in the 1930s, and their professional

trajectories bear many resemblances. Not only did they know each other personally, but also read and reviewed each other's works. Oates has thought highly of both Updike and Roth, but it was with Updike that she maintained a lively literary correspondence throughout many years. The story of Roth and Updike's acquaintance had a more competitive edge to it. As two highly ambitious men of letters, Updike and Roth "remained neck and neck in the American author sweepstakes, both repeatedly hailed by critics as the leading talent of their generation" (Begley VI). The trio's literary careers, whose evolution coincided with the Cold War, are credited with spanning the magnitude of post-war America. If, as Henry Louis Gates Jr. observed, Oates's oeuvre is enough to reconstruct the social realities of the country in the twentieth century, often depicted at their most harrowing, adding Updike's and Roth's works must indeed result in a comprehensive, rich, and multifaceted image, complete with socio-political upheavals and ethnic concerns.

Although the three authors achieved enormous popularity among readers, it is safe to say that Updike and Roth have enjoyed more critical acclaim than Oates. I mention some of the reasons for critics' wariness to Oates's works in the section devoted to the author. Nevertheless, unlike the authors discussed in the last chapter of this dissertation, Oates, Updike and Roth represent dominant literary voices in post-war America. Accordingly, their visions of Eastern Europe, notwithstanding their idiosyncrasies reflecting each author's style and thematic concerns, not to mention the individual experience of meeting the East, afford insights into the American frame of mind at the time. Simultaneously, these representations are necessarily tied up with their authors' profiles and interests. Therefore, the Eastern Europe that is presented to the reader is filtered through the eyes of cultivated highbrows, equipped with sharp intellect and erudition. And this is true not only of the writers but also of their literary creations.

As a matter of fact, the majority of works discussed in the following three chapters feature such well-educated, insightful protagonists who come to Eastern Europe shielded not only by their American passports but also their share of knowledge and expectations of the countries making up the region.

I have decided to begin my discussion with the works of John Updike for several reasons. One of them is obviously chronology. Updike, who passed away in 2009 at the age of seventy-six, was the first of the three authors to visit Eastern Europe in 1964 as the USIA Cultural Ambassador, setting the stage for other writers-travelers, like Oates who ventured behind the Iron Curtain in 1980. Hence, he was also the first of the three authors to put his impressions of Eastern Europe into fiction. Moreover, in accordance with other critics, I argue that Updike's account of Eastern Europe is grounded in the framework of the cultural combat between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, capturing, more than other works, the nature of the official cultural relations between both superpowers, without renouncing Updike's characteristic voice.

Before I proceed to discuss Updike's short stories, I offer a brief critical sketch of the author, focusing on those themes which remained dearest to his heart and fueled much of his fiction during his long and prolific career. The same pattern will be repeated for Oates and Roth, with the aim of exploring, in relation to the critical framework of this dissertation, to what extent their representations of Eastern Europe reflect their individual agendas, but also situating them within a larger context of post-war American fiction and its preoccupations.

3. John Updike

In this chapter, I set out to study four short stories which were inspired by John Updike's travels behind the Iron Curtain, and whose action is set in Eastern European locales. In accordance with the guidelines formulated in chapter 2, I start by outlining major themes in Updike's fiction, with a view to situating the stories within his oeuvre, and, in turn, finding out how they engage with American culture and politics at the time. Secondly, I briefly discuss the character of Henry Bech, Updike's cultural ambassador in Eastern Europe and a narrative vehicle for conveying his impressions of Moscow, Bucharest, Sofia, and Prague. Then, I move on to examine Updike's short stories, focusing on how Henry Bech imagines, perceives, and maps the European East.

John Updike once suggested the following epitaph for himself: "Here lies a small-town boy who tried to make the most out of what he had, who made up with diligence what he might have lacked in brilliance" (qtd. in Begley, Introduction). This is a remarkably modest appraisal for a person who is considered to be one of the greatest and most prolific authors of twentieth-century America. Yet, it does spell out some of the qualities which proved instrumental in John Updike's progress from a "small-town boy" to the sophisticated man of letters that he became. Determination, hard work, ambition, and undeniable talent are often associated with Updike's literary career, as is the small-town setting which the author immortalized in his fiction, and which has earned him the title of the poet of American middleness. As early as in 1962 Updike spoke unashamedly of his literary agenda:

> To transcribe middleness with all its grits, bumps, and anonymities, in its fullness of satisfaction and mystery: is it possible or, in view of the suffering that violently colors the periphery and that at all moments threatens to move into the

center, worth doing? Possibly not; but the horse-chestnut trees, the telephone poles, the porches, the green hedges recede to a calm point that in my subjective geography is still the center of the world (qtd. in D. Q. Miller, "Updike" 15).

Updike's eye for detail and his ability to turn seemingly mundane things into "the center of the world" earned him critical acclaim but also led some to assume that he was a writer with much stylistic prowess yet little to say. Harold Bloom famously called Updike "a minor novelist with a major style" specializing in the "easier pleasures" that "do not challenge the intellect" (Weiss n. pag.). Conversely, many a critic have pointed out that middleness in Updike's fiction is where the most dramatic tensions take place. D. Quentin Miller observes that Updike's characters, particularly in the early fiction, are torn between the sense of belonging and the desire to break free from the familiar. At the same time, those who do move away from home tend to carry it within, living "a liminal condition common to the artist who feels at once outside of his surroundings, yet simultaneously involved with them" (D. Q. Miller, "Updike" 17). In light of Updike's interest in philosophy and theology, particularly Søren Kierkegaard and Karl Barth, his small-town locale has been also interpreted as a site where the insoluble conflict between the sacred and the profane is enacted. Following Kierkegaard, faith in Updike's fiction is subjective and paradoxical. Rabbit Angstrom, Updike's most famous hero of middleness, instinctively believes that "somewhere behind all this (…) there's something that wants me to find it," (*Rabbit, Run* 104-05) yet he cannot encounter it in the conventional, institutionalized forms of religion. Instead, God-like perfection materializes in the smooth and purposeful trajectory of a golf ball which "with a kind of visible sob takes a last bite of space before vanishing in falling" (*Rabbit, Run* 109). As Marshall Boswell points out, rather than offer easy solutions or prescriptions to live by, Updike's works dramatize Kierkegaard's dialectical oppositions by depicting characters

who are locked in the perennial struggle between their natural instincts and a "stifling life of ethical, social engagement" (49). Rabbit Angstrom's defense strategy is to run away from the constraints of his "second-rate" family life only to find out that the elusive "it" he is searching for is as transient as the hole-in-one he manages to hit. Yet even though Rabbit's extramarital affair with Ruth soon loses the initial lightness, turning into another earthly burden tying the ex-basketball star to the ground, the first intercourse between these two strangers bears traces of a spiritual experience, implying the possibility of "conflating the erotic and the theological" (Boswell 54). In fact, sex and religion have been named by Updike to be two of his "three great secret things," the third one being art (De Bellis 121). The idea of sex as a panacea for existential angst is most famously explored in *Couples* (1968). The work is credited with "introducing graphic sex into the American literary mainstream" (Plath 123), but sexuality in *Couples* is also a form of transcendence. In Jack De Bellis's assessment, Updike problematizes the dichotomy between body and spirit as "[t]hrough sex couples can humanize one another in a way in which religion no longer can" (122). Sex is given special prominence within Updike's fictional microcosm also because it offers a possibility of momentarily blurring the gap between the male and the female, which otherwise seems impossible to bridge.[69]

If Updike's fiction thrives on dichotomies it is because his major subject, twentieth-century America, is defined through otherness. Difference, whether racial, ethnic, gender or political, has fueled some of the major changes undergone by the

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[69] Updike's fiction has been criticized for portraying women along archetypal gender patterns. As Kathleen Verduin argues, Updike's tendency to mythologize his female characters (as Mother Earth, seductress, and witch) stems from his insistence on their "otherness, an alterity that feminism placed at risk" (70). However, if approached from the angle of sociology, Updike's fiction chronicles also women's struggle to bridge a social gap between men and themselves. Thus Janice, the imperfect housewife and mother from *Rabbit, Run* (1960), achieves sexual emancipation in the arms of a lover in *Rabbit Redux* (1971), develops a passion of her own (tennis) in *Rabbit is Rich* (1981) and takes full control of her life by becoming a businesswoman in her own right in the last part of the tetralogy, *Rabbit at Rest* (1990). Rabbit might call her patronizingly "poor mutt," but it is Janice who survives her husband and boldly steps into the new American millennium in "Rabbit Remembered" (2000).

United States since the end of World War II. In this sense, several of Updike's works corroborate Toni Morrison's oft-cited argument that American literature has been shaped by racial binaries (Prosser 76). Notably, *Rabbit Redux* (1971) chronicles Rabbit's path toward racial awareness amidst authentic social tensions of 1969. Updike's engagement with racial otherness acquires particular importance if we bear in mind that Rabbit has been interpreted by many scholars as an epitome of white middle-class America. Even though Rabbit's mind changes under the influence of the Black Nationalist Skeeter, who introduces him to the history of American slavery and African-American civil rights movement, the novel problematizes racial differences by exploiting stereotypes and preconceptions associated with blackness and whiteness. Blackness is fetishized through overstressing bodily difference as Rabbit reads race in sexual terms, fantasizing about black women's bodies and developing homoerotic feelings toward Skeeter (Prosser 78). In Jack De Bellis's view, Updike's most personal take on the relationship between race and identity can be found in his 1989 memoirs entitled *Self-Consciousness* (8-9). Following the birth of his bi-racial grandsons, Updike composed "A Letter to My Grandsons" in which he recounts family history to the boys. Importantly, the very first line of the essay expresses a deep color-blind affinity between Updike and his grandsons: "We are all of mixed race" (164). In the same connection, "At War with My Skin" examines the author's life-long psoriasis as a kind of stigmatization which becomes "internalized as social difference, analogous to being black" (Prosser 87).

To a large extent, America's identity in Updike's works is formed in the process of confronting otherness coming from both within and without. Given the subject matter of this dissertation, I am most interested in the way Updike's works engage with "bipolar politics from which America gained definition" in the second half of the

twentieth century (Olster 8). As D. Quentin Miller deftly argues, Updike's writing career coincided with the Cold War, and the cultural history which the American author chronicles through his writings is to a considerable degree shaped by "America's anti-Soviet identity quest" (*John Updike* 1). Updike's most famous Cold-War protagonist is obviously the suburban hero Harry "Rabbit" Angstrom, whose sense of himself as an American developed in opposition to the Soviet Union, and whom the Cold War provided with "a reason to get up in the morning" (*Rabbit at Rest* 353). If Rabbit's identity is the fruit of the impact that the Soviet-American struggle exerted on American self-definition (at least in its white, middle-class, and pro-Vietnam incarnation), then Henry Bech, Updike's second most popular literary alter ego, assumes the role of America's export product: a cultural agent whose Americanness takes shape when juxtaposed with the foreign other, namely the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe.

3.1. Henry Bech: An In-between Character

On coming back from his state-sponsored tour Updike needed a vessel to voice his impressions of the places he had visited and the people he had encountered. To this purpose, he created the character of Henry Bech. In this sense, Bech emerges as a product of his times; his existence overlapping with the years of the Cold War. However, if Rabbit epitomizes Updike's favorite turf—American middleness, then Henry Bech connotes the kind of life that became Updike's once his career as a writer got under way. As a well-known novelist, Bech spends a considerable amount of time performing authorial duties, i.e. touring the country to read and discuss his and others' works. One such invitation comes from the State Department and Bech obligingly agrees to visit the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the function of American

Cultural Ambassador. The fiction mirrors reality for in 1964 Updike took on exactly the same commitment. Together with another American novelist, John Cheever, Updike traveled to the Soviet Union, Romania, Bulgaria, and Czechoslovakia.

Although one is tempted to identify Bech with his creator, there is much to discourage such impulse. In fact, Updike himself said that Bech was "an anti-Updike, as far as [he] could conceive of one" (qtd. in De Bellis 88). Accordingly, Henry Bech is an unmarried and childless Jewish author with a liberal slant, who fought in World War II and lives in New York. Most importantly, however, he is plagued by an affliction which Updike managed to avoid entirely: writer's block. By making Bech into a Jew, not only did Updike distance himself from his protagonist, but also artistically exploited this "major force in American fiction, the Jewish novelist" (De Bellis 90). In an oft-cited fictional letter addressed to Updike, which also serves as the foreword *to Bech: A Book* (1970), Bech conceives of himself as an amalgam of some of the best Jewish- American authors and their literary alter egos. Therefore, outwardly Bech takes after Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow, his childhood "seems out of Alex Portnoy," while his "ancestral past" brings to mind the prose of I.B. Singer (*The Complete* 9). Bech thus seems like an ideal vehicle for conveying Updike's thoughts on Eastern European locations, his ethnic background promising to serve as a meaningful connection with the Old World. At the same time, several scholars found fault with Bech's ethnicity. Most notably, Jewish writer Cynthia Ozick argued that

> Bech-as-Jew has no existence, is not there, because he has not been imagined.
> Bech-as-Jew is a switch on a library computer. What passes for Bech-as-Jew is
> an Appropriate Reference Machine, cranked on whenever Updike reminds
> himself that he is obligated to produce a sociological symptom: crank, gnash,
> and out flies an inverted sentence (n.pag).

In Ozick's eyes, Henry Bech as a Jew does not hold water. In other words, his identity is merely a collection of ethnic stereotypes and misconceptions about the kind of intellectual and emancipated Jewishness that Bech is supposed to connote. In exposing Bech's thin cultural heritage, Ozick comes to the conclusion that Updike's character is "a stupid intellectual" and "a historical cretin." While Sanford Pinsker concurs with Ozick in that Updike's engagement with ethnicity in Bech stories produces a "sociological 'atmosphere' rather than a serious (Jewish) vision" (96), he also points out that Bech was not destined to convey any such view. To a large extent, argues Pinsker, Bech is an outsider not only among fellow Jews but also other intellectuals. Suffering from writer's block, Bech is "his own sharpest critic" (Pinsker 100) equipped with a gift of irony not only toward others but particularly toward himself. If Bech sounds at times as a parody, it is not a parody of Jewishness, but rather "a case study in contemporary American authorship" providing Updike with a vehicle for passing "a rather mischievous or even impish commentary on the expected role of the writer to take on roles, to be a character" (Parker Royal, "Gentile" 38). In Derek Parker Royal's view, Bechiana is all about performativity, since "the protagonist is constantly donning masks, taking on personas, playacting in ways that both satisfy yet confound his audience's expectations" ("Gentile" 39). This appraisal is particularly relevant in the context of this dissertation, because it points to Henry Bech's volatility. As shown above, Henry Bech is a Jew, though apparently a flimsy one; an American, but definitely not as patriotic as Rabbit Angstrom; and a writer, albeit artistically blocked. Far from being a static construct, Bech is thus a repository of different selves, which, as the following discussion will show, are contingent upon the circumstances and the other people. On top of these identities, another one is added—that of a cultural ambassador; a mediator between his country of origin and the cultural other "who transforms and negotiates

intercultural spaces" (Keller 357). In a word, not only is Bech a liminal character embodying several (imperfect) identities, but his in-between condition is further reinforced by the role of the cultural intermediary. Bech's malleability is thus something to bear in mind when analyzing the character's ventures behind the Iron Curtain. Imagology tells us that national images are hardly static constructs; however, they may be even less stable if seen from a perspective of a character that is a *representation* himself.

Following his transatlantic journey, Updike wrote three stories inspired by the four countries he visited. "The Bulgarian Poetess," "Rich in Russia," and "Bech in Rumania" had been first published in *The New Yorker* between 1965 and 1970 to be later collected in *Bech: A Book* (1970). The story about Czechoslovakia, published under a catchy, rhymed title "Bech in Czech," appeared in *The New Yorker* in 1985,[70] two decades after Updike had first visited the country. The literary form which Updike chose as a narrative vehicle for recounting his Eastern European adventures through the eyes of Henry Bech is by no means accidental. Although most critical attention has been given to Updike's novels, the American author "has exhibited a sustained mastery of the short story throughout his career, shaping a canon of short fiction" (Luscher ix). In fact, Updike once admitted that "the short story may be what I do best" (qtd. in Luscher 171), and his view was confirmed over the years by a constant flow of prizes and honors awarded in recognition of his short fiction. In discussing Updike's achievements as a short-story writer one cannot forget *The New Yorker*, the magazine where Updike started his career at the age of twenty-three and with which he retained an almost sixty-year-long relationship. Many of his short works were created with *The New Yorker* in

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[70] The story was then published in another volume of Bech's adventures, *Bech at Bay* (1998).

mind,[71] as was also the case with Henry Bech stories. Even though Updike had never been a New York writer, since he left the city for Ipswich, Massachusetts only two years after he had arrived, his stint as "The Talk of the Town" reporter "peeled open the city for him" and "gave him the courage to create in the mid-sixties an alter ego, Henry Bech, who is a New Yorker through and through" (Begley III). According to Robert Luscher, from the start Updike's stories privileged "reflection and the rhythmic dimension created by rich figurative language and imagery" over "the traditional emphasis on plot and dramatic action" (x). In this sense, Bechiana forms part of Updike's canon, yet it also stands out for its playful, ironic dimension, which earned Bech much popularity with his American readership. Nevertheless, Henry Bech cannot and should not be reduced to the comic realm. As the following discussion will hopefully demonstrate, the Jewish-American novelist is much more than that. Focusing on Bech's travels behind the Iron Curtain, I will shed some light on his role in the process of imagining the foreign other by one of the major chroniclers of post-war America.

3.2. Under Western Eyes: "Rich in Russia"

The story which has garnered the greatest critical attention recounts Bech's/Updike's Soviet adventure. This I believe can be accounted for not only by the work's artistic merits but particularly by its subject matter. A contemporary reader of

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[71] Although Updike had dreamed of writing for the magazine since he was thirteen and grew up reading fiction published in *The New Yorker*, at the beginning of his career he was wary of being associated with the so-called "New Yorker school of fiction," fearing that "his relationship with the magazine would distort perception of his work and prejudice critics against the novel he would shortly be publishing" (Begley III).

Bech's exploits finds "Rich in Russia" to be the opening story in the collection,[72] even though Updike first dramatized his experience as the U.S. cultural ambassador in "The Bulgarian Poetess." Therefore, I propose to treat "Rich in Russia" as the key text in Updike's transatlantic narratives, setting the stage and tone for Bech's journeys in Eastern Europe. By the same token, the Soviet Union emerges as the dominant presence and the cultural other against which the United States of America, and Bech himself, are set.

Early in the story Updike, in the guise of a college professor addressing his students, situates Bech's visit to the Soviet Union in a specific moment in the history of Soviet-American relations: "Russia in those days, like everywhere else, was a slightly more innocent place. Khrushchev, freshly deposed, had left an atmosphere, almost comical, of warmth, of a certain fitful openness, of inscrutable and oblique *possibility*" (12, my emphasis). This sense of potentiality permeating global politics has direct consequences for Bech. The authorities decide that the time is ripe for sending the "artistically blocked but socially fluent" novelist to Moscow "at the expense of our State Department for a month of that mostly *imaginary* activity termed 'cultural exchange'" (12, my emphasis). The adjective "imaginary" is crucial here, for it suggests that despite its official character and well-delimited aims cultural exchange is an elusive activity, which cannot be measured as it is contingent not only upon the mediator, but also on what is mediated and to whom. This, in turn, implies certain open-endedness and latitude, further reinforced by Henry Bech's own in-between status, and the act of crossing the Iron Curtain.

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[72] The collection which I am referring to and quoting from throughout this chapter is a Penguin Modern Classics edition called *The Complete Henry Bech* from 2006. It contains all the stories discussed in this dissertation but *not* all Henry Bech stories. These can be found in *The Complete Henry Bech* published by Knopf in 2001.

Therefore, from the very beginning of the story Bech's transatlantic journey is endowed with liminal potential. In chapter 1, air travel has been discussed as a liminal experience of being suspended "betwixt and between" two places. Drawing on Mark Gottdiener's insights and Salman Rushdie's fictional engagement with airborne journey, I have argued that flying entails removal from normality and entering an alternative reality; a condition which is also experienced by Henry Bech in "Rich in Russia." Stepping into the Russian Aeroflot plane, the writer experiences a transformative potential of flying, as he is transported right into his Jewish childhood in Brooklyn; the plane smelling "like his uncles' backrooms in Williamsburg, of swaddled body heat and proximate potato boiling" (12). Importantly, this journey into the past is closely related to the fact that he is flying on a Russian plane. From Bech's Russian journal, "reprinted" in appendix, we learn that the aroma of nostalgia comes from the food served by the Russian stewardesses: "real potatoes, beef sausage, borsch;" the nutriments capable of evoking Bech's half-forgotten immigrant roots in a manner reminiscent of Proust's madeleine (144). Not only does the food create the sensation of being back at a Jewish household, also the foreign languages spoken by Bech's fellow-passengers seem "strangely soothing," making him feel "at home in Babel" (144). Yet the liminal act of flying may also occasion anxiety. In Ursula Kluwick's words, "Air-space, though a focus of desire, is an element fundamentally alien to humans, and flight is not only an expression of freedom; it also entails a profound loss of control, since by entering the realm of air we surrender ourselves completely to influences beyond our authority" (4). Therefore, the cozy atmosphere of the plane is disturbed by Bech's fear of the unknown, driven by the popular representation of the Soviet Union as a spy-novel-like maze of secret agents and blood-curdling mysteries: "Premonition: no one will meet. Author Disappears Behind Iron Curtain. (…). Everywhere, secrets" (144-45).

Despite Bech's foreboding, he does not vanish into thin air behind the Iron Curtain. To the contrary, he receives a warm welcome at the Moscow airport, followed by a celebrity-worthy limousine drive to his apartment.

However, the sensation of entering a world apart, which overtakes Bech on his flight to Moscow, does not vanish when the Aeroflot touches the ground. Instead, it intensifies once the novelist realizes that time flows differently in Russia, expanding into "steppes," as if mirroring the country's melancholy landscape (145). As discussed earlier in this dissertation, similar appraisal of Russian time can be found in the writings of Milan Kundera and Czesław Miłosz, the advocates of the idea of Central Europe. However, whereas for Kundera Europe and Russia cannot be reconciled, Bech's mental map is sufficiently ample to accommodate the giant country within the bounds of the Old World. Starting with Bech's Proustian experience onboard Aeroflot, the story maps a common cultural space in which Russia is merged with pre-war Central Europe, as the novelist finds himself in a Moscow apartment filled with photographs of Kafka, Einstein, Freud, and Wittgenstein "pointedly evoking the glory of pre-Hitlerian *Judenkultur*" (12). This complex cultural terrain extends to the United States of America, encompassing those Jewish-American artists and intellectuals whose roots, like Henry Bech's, reach back to the Old World. However, it is not until coming to Moscow that Bech is reminded of his Jewishness, for in his writing he "had sought to reach out from the ghetto of his heart towards the wider expanses across Hudson" (12). Accordingly, Bech's bestselling novel, *Travel Light* celebrated tie-free life in the manner of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, while his artistic taste had not been for the Jewish Renaissance novels, but rather for the Hollywood movies of the thirties,[73]

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[73] Therefore it comes as no surprise that Bech's favorite 1930s writer "turned his back on his three beautiful Brooklyn novels and went into the desert to write scripts for Doris Day" (13). Bech must be thinking about Jewish-American author Daniel Fuchs (1909-1993) whose fiction portraying Jewish life in America had been highly praised by John Updike and who indeed moved to Hollywood to make films.

representing the ultimate triumph of American Jews and attesting to the way Central-European immigrants had shaped America, giving this "formless land dreams and even a kind of conscience" (13). Although Bech has made a conscious effort to distance himself from Jewishness,[74] he is glad to rediscover it during his stay in Russia: "There, in Russia, (…) Bech did find a quality of life—impoverished yet ceremonial, shabby yet ornate, sentimental, embattled, and avuncular—reminiscent of his neglected Jewish past" (13). In other words, by traveling to Russia Bech revisits a world which, though "impoverished" and "shabby," was nevertheless rich in tradition and ritual. By comparing life in contemporary Russia to the traditional Jewish lifestyle, Bech endows the hetero-image of the country with positive connotations, such as "virtue," and "generosity" (13). At the same time, however, he removes it from the present moment, relegating it instead to a liminal realm "betwixt and between" past and present. Similar in-between condition is attributed to Russia in another work written by Updike on the subject of Russia: "Poem on Far Land" from 1965. Here Russia's liminal nature is captured in the last stanza, where the country is imagined as suspended between two temporal dimensions: "Your vastness yearns in sympathy/Between what was and that which is" (qtd. in D. Q. Miller, *John Updike* 113).

While speaking about Bech's half-forgotten Jewish past, I have consistently used the name "Russia" rather than historically more accurate "Soviet Union." This has been a conscious strategy aimed at signalizing two, interconnected representations. I find the concept of imaginative/philosophic geography to be particularly helpful when it comes to accounting for Bech's Jewish-American perspective of Russia. As explained in chapter 2, imaginative geography denotes a process in which physical spaces are

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[74] Alternatively, Bech's refusal to treat his ethnicity as a source of inspiration might be explained by his inability to do so. From this perspective, Bech's comment on Fuchs's withdrawal from fiction writing for the sake of moviemaking seems critical rather than favorable—Fuchs's outstanding writerly talent being sacrificed on the pyre of Hollywood pop-culture.

endowed with meaning which eludes strict factual knowledge. To put it differently, the *poetics* of space becomes more important than the actual space. Being a Jew, Bech is drawn to the qualities he encounters in Russia, because they remind him of his Jewish background. But he is also an American which means that he conforms to the dominant narrative of the Cold-War Soviet-American relations. Therefore, Bech's Jewish-American imaginative geography of Russia reflects, on the one hand, the emotions the place triggers in him, while, on the other, intricate power politics between the countries. Therefore, in Bech's private imaginative geography, Russia seems homely and safe, evoking long-forgotten childhood memories of kinship and traditional values. However, Bech's role as the State Department cultural representative implies a different kind of engagement with the country, officially aimed at fostering amicable contacts between the superpowers, yet indirectly promoting American values and way of life. It is this official representation that I wish to focus on in the rest of this section.

The complex political choreography between the superpowers involves a series of well-coordinated moves. Therefore, in a gesture of friendship, the Soviet present Bech with expense money as well as generous royalties which together add up to a small Russian fortune. Thus, for the first time in his life Bech becomes rich—ironically this sudden injection of money befalls the writer not in the capitalist United States of America, but in the communist society. However, when Bech's Russian translator, Ekaterina, nicknamed "Kate," advises him to deposit the money in a bank "as in the capitalist countries," Bech cries out in protest (15). Kate's seemingly innocent proposition triggers a response which, though mocking, reveals Bech's compliance with the official discourse of Soviet-American combat for world supremacy: "'What?' said Bech, 'And help support the Socialist state? When you are already years ahead of us in the space race? I would be adding thrust to your rockets'" (15). Unfazed, Bech decides

to approach his newly-earned wealth in a (stero)typically American fashion, "we must spend it!," he says to Kate, "[s]pend, spend. It's the Keynesian way. We will make Mother Russia a consumer society" (15).

Bech's sudden richness serves as a pretext to explore the polarities which constitute the main substance of the American, highly-stereotyped vision of Cold-War Russia (and vice versa). Therefore, the relationship between the two countries is mapped through such binary opposites as capitalism vs. communism, abundance vs. scarcity, and free choice vs. lack of possibilities. The last dichotomy is brought to the fore when Bech attempts to spend some of his rubles on a leather suitcase. The "vast store" to which the translator takes him offers "a puzzling duplication of suitcase sections" each containing "the same squarish mountain of dark cardboard boxes," but not even one leather valise, something quite unthinkable in the U.S. (17). The overarching contrast is obviously that between East and West, and since Bech is too much of a gentleman to openly voice the latter's superiority, it is Kate who conveniently does it for him: "I know what you have in the West. I have been to Science-Fiction Writers' Congress in Vienna. This great store, and not one leather suitcase. It is a disgrace upon the people" (17). Locked in the East-West squabble, Bech develops a "clowning super-American manner that disguised all complaints as 'acts,'" to which Kate responds with "shoolteacherish patience, with ageless peasant roots" (14). His inability to transcend stiff frames of cultural representations prevents him from seeing more than meets the eye. As Miller points out, Bech's failure to strike a romantic relationship with Kate represents "a failure of Russia and America to come to terms with one another" (*John Updike* 120). Although Bech manages to connect with "Mother Russia" on a personal plane, his official performance is marred by a series of blunders exposing the schizophrenic character of his cultural mission. Accordingly, Bech's

American "acts" seem to always strike the wrong note: he praises garish social-realist paintings in front of Kate, even though she deems them bad art anyway, yet offends official Soviet writers by declaring Nabokov to be "America's best living author" and calling the work of dissident author Yevtushenko "patriotic" (17). However, the highest point of Bech's incompetence as the cultural mediator coincides with his departure from Moscow. Bech's cardboard suitcase bursts open in the middle of the airport revealing precious animal furs, brass Russian toys, and several volumes written in Cyrillic. With Kate's help, Bech manages to put the whole "loot" back in the suitcase with the exception of heavy books which he carelessly abandons, "fearful of being burdened with more responsibilities" (24). The effect might be comic yet this final "act" fixes Bech in the mold of a stereotypical American tourist for whom consumer goods and personal comfort mean more than immaterial culture represented here by the discarded volumes. Rather than mitigate intercultural differences, Bech's "mediating" mission exacerbates them by upholding auto- and hetero-stereotypes. Although Kate's final kiss "moist and good, like a boiled potato" (23) echoes the sense of warm familiarity and a deeper personal connection with Russia, which Bech has experienced at the outset of his journey, its effect is somewhat lost on the writer, half-buried under a heavy blanket of cultural clichés,[75] which, though vivid, make for quite a rudimentary final image of Russia, and the Russian-American relationship.

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[75] Jospeh Benatov's analysis of John Updike's visit to Soviet Russia, supported by official documentation from both American and Russian archives, reveals that there is little resemblance between Bech's and Updike's cultural performance behind the Iron Curtain, the latter having been much more restrained and tactful in formulating his impressions of the country. Benatov's conclusion is that in "Rich in Russia" Updike did what was expected of him as a cultural emissary, that is perpetuated the popular discourse of cultural clichés. However, the way he did it, using irony and sarcasm, may suggest an implicit desire to subvert and ridicule mutual national stereotypes (*Looking* 64).

3.3. Into the Wild East: "Bech in Rumania"

Cold-War tensions wane once Bech leaves the country. Having spent a whole month in Russia, Bech heads to Romania, where he is to stay for just four days. Such a short time seems hardly sufficient to form any meaningful impressions of the country, especially since there is not much of a previous hetero-image to be either altered or corroborated: "Bech knew little about Rumania. From his official briefing he learnt it was 'a Latin island in a Slavic sea,' that during World War II its anti-Semitism had been the most ferocious in Europe, that now it was seeking economic independence of the Soviet Bloc" (30). This dry, textbook-like description points to the marginal status Romania holds in Bech's American imaginary. Out of this official account, Bech picks those elements which comply with his private imaginative geography of Eastern Europe. Therefore, it is Romanian anti-Semitism that sticks in Bech's mind, for as a Jewish writer he finds it difficult to imagine "murderousness" and "obstinate savagery;" the qualities which are missing from his own "budget of emotions" (30).[76] If Bech, an intellectual, knows so little about this country, we may assume that the general public's familiarity with Romania would be even lower. Accordingly, Bech's impressions of Romania lack the involvement and vividness his stay in Russia has triggered. The fact that Romania has been Sovietized but is not *Soviet* means that Bech does not feel obliged to dutifully enact his part in the Soviet-American Cold-War theater, flaunting his "super-American manner" and his "acts" for the sake of his communist hosts. To the contrary, "after five weeks of consorting with Communists," he is "increasingly tempted to evade, confuse, and mock his fellow Americans" (25). Wearing an astrakhan hat, which he has purchased in Moscow and which gives him the air of a Russian, Bech

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[76] This is yet another interesting way of stereotyping Jewishness. Cynthia Ozick would probably say that the Appropriate Reference Machine responsible for creating Henry Bech has spit out the following characterological qualities: "docile," "gentle," and "civilized."

remains unnoticed while the Embassy men keep running back and forth the airport lounge searching for the famed author. Therefore, the hat gives Bech's journey a sense of continuity, serving as a link between Moscow and Bucharest, but also symbolizes Bech's compliance with his conciliatory role as a cultural ambassador between East and West, and his respect for the culture of the other. On the other hand, it allows him to become temporarily invisible, disguising his Americanness behind a traditional costume of the other. This, in turn, helps him to briefly mislead his "conspirational compatriots," who are eager to "plug [Bech] in" (25, 26). The hat is thus emblematic of Bech's liminal ambivalence which I have hinted at earlier in this chapter. In other words, he is and he is not a representative American, which, as the following will show, inevitably affects his cultural performance in Romania.

Although Bech is still grounded in the framework of diplomacy, he is now less prone to think in black-and-white terms of the official discourse of the cultural war. Especially since he is not in Soviet Russia anymore, and there is no rival to stand against. Thus, in a "smiling Party underling called Athanase Petrescu" (25), who becomes Bech's guide in Romania, the American author discovers a harmless translator with a fervent passion for literature, and American literature in particular. Yet the Embassy people are desperate not to let Bech waste his stay in Romania chatting about Hemingway with Petrescu. In a telephone conversation with Bech, the Embassy representative Phillips pointedly reveals the role that the USIA has envisaged for the American author: "'I know damn well this line is bugged, but here goes. This country is hot. Anti-Socialism is bursting out all over. My inkling is that they want to get you out of Bucharest, away from all the liberal writers who are dying to meet you,'" to which Bech responds: "'Are you sure they're not dying to meet Arthur Miller?'" (26). It is clear that Bech is expected to establish contacts with Romanian writers and by doing so

fulfill his function as the agent of the free world, joining forces with the progressive elements and perhaps even contributing to the expansion of democratic values in the Soviet-infected Romanian society. However, Bech does not think of himself as the right person to accomplish this mission; somebody like Arthur Miller, a well-known intellectual activist, would be much more suitable. Nor does he show much interest in meeting liberal writers, the only Romanian author he has ever heard of being Eugene Ionesco, who has been living and working in France since the 1940s.

Nevertheless, Phillips arranges a meeting between the American author and the Head of the Writers' Union, described as "an immaculate miniature man with a pink face and hair as white as a dandelion poll" (27). In doing so, he reveals the Embassy's ignorance about the cultural situation in Romania. As it turns out, the man is a party hack who is not willing to introduce Bech to "liberal" writers, or any Romanian writers whatsoever, claiming that most of them "are bathing at the Black Sea" at this time of the year (29).[77] In fact, it is Bech who has to explain to Taru who Ionescu is, for as the communist tells him: "Western books are a luxury here, so we are not able to follow each new nihilist movement" (28). Obviously, the communist knows all about the playwright, but he prefers to feign ignorance and thus mock the American, as well as the Western idea of art for art's sake.

Importantly, Bech does not confront Taru. Nor does he care about establishing any kind of cultural connection with Romanian authors, whoever they may be. However, I wish to suggest that Bech's indifference should not be interpreted at face value, especially in light of John Updike's biography. Although Updike read and reviewed Soviet and Eastern European literature, in addition to supporting dissident

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[77] Until 1977 intellectual dissidence was practically non-existent in communist Romania (Petrescu and Petrescu 337).

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authors,[78] he remained unwilling to praise a work of literature solely for its political merits, overlooking the question of aesthetics. In D. Quentin Miller's words, "[a]s the Cold War progressed, he grew more confident in his belief that writers who don't sacrifice aesthetics for politics are preferable to those who do, regardless of their country of origin" (*John Updike* 112). Therefore, by making Bech blatantly unconcerned with Romanian authors, Updike might be expressing his own reluctant attitude to literature written for politics' sake, without regard to aesthetics. This interpretation seems even more plausible if we bear in mind that most of the conversations between Bech and Petrescu revolve around great American classics: Melville, Hawthorne, Twain, Hemingway, rather than Eastern European authors. Moreover, Updike seems to be casting an ironic glance on the idea of an orchestrated cultural exchange epitomized by the Embassy man Phillips, aimed at achieving political rather than cultural objectives. Therefore, when Bech accidentally meets a Romanian author he feels "duty-bound" to confront him and thus fulfill his obligation as the ambassador of Western values, which he has been neglecting so far (41). Rather than establish a cultural dialog, their brief exchange stresses the East-West dichotomy which has formed the backbone of Bech's encounter with Soviet Russia:

> Bech asked him, 'What do you write about?'
>
> The wife (…) translated the question, and the answer, which was brief. 'Peasants,' she told Bech. 'He wants to know, what do *you* write about?'
>
> Bech spoke to him directly. '*La bourgeoisie*,' he said and that completed the cultural exchange (41).

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[78] Unlike his literary alter ego, John Updike took an active part in defending dissident authors from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Although Henry Bech correctly identifies Arthur Miller as one of the most politically involved American authors, his creator's role in supporting dissident cause should not be overlooked. In fact, in 1966 Updike joined Miller in introducing the Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko at Queens College, New York (D. Q. Miller, *John Updike* 107). He also, along with other writers and intellectuals, signed letters in support of persecuted Soviet and Eastern-European authors. Moreover, he helped Philip Roth in his secret project aimed at providing financial support to Czechoslovak authors.

As fleeting and perfunctory as this East-West encounter is, it fills Bech with a pleasant sense of a well-performed duty—having returned to his Bucharest hotel, he falls into "the deep, unapologetic sleep of the sated" (41). Bech's satisfaction with his performance in the cultural confrontation with the Romanian author signals a broader issue. It is the familiar East vs. West Cold-War narrative, which has determined Bech's "super-American" behavior in Soviet Russia, that, momentarily, gives him sufficient self-confidence to face the communist writer. However, whereas in Moscow the rules of the game were clear, in Romania Bech feels at a loss. As hinted before, the country is a mystery to him, and Bech's ignorance causes him to approach it with apprehension which has been missing from his Russian experience: "Yet there had been a tough and heroic naïveté in Russia that he missed here, where something shrugging and effete seemed to leave room for a vein of energetic evil" (37). Not only is Romania different from the U.S., it is also removed from the Soviet Union; a strange and unfamiliar place which makes Bech feel uncomfortable, even fearful. These mixed feelings toward the Romanian other are reflected in Bech's attitude to another character of the story: the Party driver. The story had been initially called "The Rumanian Chauffer" in reference to the silent and nameless man who drives Bech and Petrescu around Bucharest and takes them to Brasov, the place where, as Phillips informs Bech, "Dracula hung out" (26).[79] The driver, described as "a short man the color of ashes" proves to be a real strain on Bech's American nerves, tooting the horn incessantly at every moving object, slowing and accelerating without warning, and approaching each sharp curve as if it were "an enemy" (31). This senseless bravado not only gives Bech a severe headache, but it also fills him with irrational fear, the driver's "death-grey face" embodying for him "everything foul, stale, stupid, and uncontrollable in the world" (36). This in turn

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[79] Unsurprisingly, this potent place-myth of Romania forms part of Bech's American hetero-image of the country.

rekindles Bech's memories of a childhood playmate with whom little Henry "always argued, and was always right, and always lost" (36). One such quarrel transformed into an ugly fight, in which Henry's face had been brutally pressed into the dirty cement ground studded with bits of glass and pebbles. Joseph Benatov reads Bech's reminiscing as part of "a larger recurring trope of the East's existence in the past" (*Looking* 45). Little has changed in this respect if we recall Larry Wolff's study of the eighteenth-century representation of Eastern Europe as wavering between past and present. Yet it is noteworthy that the unpleasant recollection of helplessness in the face of mindless violence, which has been triggered by the Romanian chauffer, stands in sharp contrast to the warm memories which came flooding back once Bech had left the U.S. for Moscow. Although the past, both personal and collective, functions as the key to comprehend foreign spaces in both stories, there is a considerable difference in the way Bech perceives Russia and Romania. This, I believe, might be explained by the position which these countries occupy on Bech's mental map of the non-Western world. Given Soviet-American struggle for world supremacy, Russia features there much more prominently, overshadowing geographically smaller and politically insignificant Romania. Accordingly, Bech is at ease "defining himself in absolutes against Russia," whereas in Romania he feels threatened and confused (D. Q. Miller, *John Updike* 124). In other words, while the omnipresent Cold-War discourse has somewhat domesticated the Soviet Union in the American mind during almost two decades of the struggle between both superpowers, the image of Eastern Europe still remains relatively obscure and thus potentially moldable. [80] Since Bech's initial knowledge of Romania is scarce—there is not much hetero-image to talk about—he projects one negative experience onto

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[80] Furthermore, as shown in the previous chapter, since the late nineteenth century Russia has held a prominent place in American imaginative geography, inspiring conflicting views and feelings: "Russians and Americans long coexisted in a tense parity, regarding each other as not-quite-European equals, occasional role models, wartime allies, political antagonists, and desired interlocutors" (Chatterjee and Holmgren, Introduction 4).

the whole foreign space. As a consequence, the silent yet menacing driver dominates Bech's sojourn in Romania, making him feel edgy and vulnerable and determining his impression of the place: "'Is it possible that he is the late Adolf Hitler, kept alive by Count Dracula?,'" says Bech to Petrescu mockingly (35). Seemingly innocuous, Bech's remark provides some imagological food for thought. By combining two powerful tropes: a historical figure which has come to stand for the most vivid embodiment of human evil, and a fictional personification of bloodthirsty monstrosity, respectively, Bech maps Romania as a half-real, half-imaginary space of danger, where "the vein of energetic evil" has been pulsating since the legendary times of Count Dracula. If Russia has caused Bech to reconnect with pre-Holocaust Jewishness, in Romania he is on the lookout for traces of the ideology which eradicated Jewish culture. Accordingly, he senses hidden agenda in the chauffer's nerve-shattering style of driving and his empty, threatening face. In a similar vein, he is leery of Petrescu's intentions when the translator describes a hotel chanteuse as a "typical little Jewess,"[81] while emitting a "purr Bech had not heard before" (35). The association between the driver, the Nazi leader, and the legendary vampire, together with Bech's sensitivity to any signs of anti-Semitism demonstrate to what extent American representations of communist Romania have been shaped by the memory of World War II, particularly if refracted through Bech's ethnic perspective. However, it also provides insights into the mental process behind forming stereotypes and their (dubious) potential to account for people's behavior. As I have explained in the chapter on imagology, our perceptions of otherness are determined by, in Walter Lippmann's words, "what our culture has already defined

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[81] Place makes the man. In "Bech Panics," the Jewish author is accused of racism by an African-American student, on the grounds that one of the characters in his bestselling novel *Travel Light* is referred to as "Negress." Bech dismisses the accusation by insisting that the term is meant to designate "a scientific racial grouping" and that he uses it "without prejudice" (90). The girl then asks him how he feels about the word "Jewess," to which Bech replies: "Just as I do about 'duchess,'" even though the name makes him "wince" (91). In Romania, given the country's history of anti-Semitism, the roles change, and it is Bech who feels obliged to remind Petrescu that "Jewess" is an offensive word.

for us." Therefore, in foregrounding the familiar figure of Dracula and Romanian anti-Semitism, Bech's representation of contemporary communist Romania corroborates the schematic image established at the outset of the story, casting it as semi-civilized and xenophobic. In this sense, Bech's simplistic appraisal of Romania seems to evoke the Western tradition of stereotyping the Balkans as violent and benighted, which I briefly discussed in the section devoted to American literary representations of Eastern Europe.

In Russia Bech knows who he is: a Jew and an American, whose identity vis-á-vis Soviets complies with the official U.S. foreign policy. In Romania, he is not only afraid but also disoriented to the point that "he must question his definition of himself" (D. Q. Miller, *John Updike* 121). In this light, Bech's sardonic humor, best visible in his conversations with Petresu, is aimed at something more than mere playfulness. A good illustration of this is the following exchange between the communist translator and the American author:

> 'Is it possible to you that *Pierre* is a yet greater work than *The White Whale*?'
>
> 'No, I think it is yet not so great, possibly."
>
> 'You are ironical about my English. Please excuse it. Being prone to motion sickness has discollected my thoughts' (35).

Though playful, the exchange conceals Bech's condescension toward the Romanian. Not only does he mock Petrescu's flawed English, but he also jeers at the apparatchik's obsequiousness and his clumsily ornate sentences, which bring to mind communist newspeak. Yet Bech's patronizing manner does in fact disguise his inability to comprehend Romania, which is laid bare in one of the most vivid (and at once most perplexing) scenes in the story, where Bech visits a Romanian night club.

Eager to show the famous American that communists too can have fun, Petrescu takes him to La Caverne Bleue, or "the most celebrated night club in Bucharest," a

place which, though reminiscent of an American nightclub, possesses "the strange spaciousness of a dream" (38). What awaits Bech inside is equally unreal. For what seems like an interminable period of time, Bech watches a bizarre artistic concoction involving dancers, singers, and acrobats of different races and nationalities, who keep entertaining the audience with an incessant flow of outlandish acts. It is not until Bech wearily asks his hosts whether communists "ever get tired of having fun" that the party abandons the unusual locale (41). Clearly, Bech cannot make head or tail of Romania and its people. What is perhaps most striking to him is that people do have fun there and, as the above scene reveals, it can be far more exuberant than what he is familiar with. However, more than a mere representation of a Romanian kind of entertainment, this bewildering ménage, involving such bizarre national types as "[t]ypical Polish beauties" "dressed as rather naked cyclists," Czech women engaging in "a languorous act with tinted pigeons," or an East German dressed as a cowgirl, casts Eastern Europe as a place which may be beheld but which eludes comprehension (40). Therefore, the preposterous performance symbolizes a smokescreen dividing Bech from these people behind the Iron Curtain. He may discern their shapes and even form some opinion of them (as he does in the case of the Romanian writer) but ultimately they remain unreachable.

Yet the most absurd exchange of the story comes at the end of Bech's visit to the Romanian capital. Even though Bech did virtually nothing for the sake of cultural exchange, the Embassy man Phillips is amazed at the author's "sensational" performance when he learns that Bech had met the Romanian writer; "the hottest Red writer this side of Solzhenitsyn," and visited La Caverne Bleue; an authentic Romanian "underground," in Phillips's words (42-43). Accommodatingly, Bech does not correct Phillips's version of events, comparing his role in the U.S.-Soviet cultural warfare to a

"low-flying U2" (43). By juxtaposing Bech's anemic performance with the image of a CIA plane used for airing missiles over the Soviet Union, Updike again seems to be hinting at the ambivalence underlying USIA's cultural mission, as well as the awkward position in which it places its designated spokespersons, like Henry Bech and himself. Bech's four-day stay is hardly enough to get to know Romanian culture, not to mention the country itself. Accordingly, not only does he fail to establish any kind of meaningful dialog with the cultural other, but also the hetero-image that he (re)constructs is unavoidably reductionist, ossifying Romania in the stereotype of obscure and dangerous. Irony and mockery are Bech's weapons against Romania's impenetrability, but even they are incapable of blotting out the sensation of fear that this alien space has instilled in the American author. "He realized that for four days he had been afraid" is Bech's final appraisal of his visit behind the Iron Curtain (43).

3.4. Behind the Looking Glass: "The Bulgarian Poetess"

As mentioned before, "The Bulgarian Poetess" was the first account of Bech's state-sponsored globetrotting; it was published in 1965, several months after John Updike had returned from his tour around the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. Yet in the 1970 collection of Bech stories, *Bech: A Book*, the story comes third, preceded by "Rich in Russia," and "Bech in Rumania."[82] This is not surprising given the fact that "The Bulgarian Poetess" includes references to Bech's previous transatlantic travels, thus giving the whole fictional tour a sense of coherence and continuity. Moreover, it even features the familiar astrakhan hat, which Bech had bought in Moscow and then wore for disguise at the Bucharest airport. Even though the story's place in the

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[82] The same is true for the collection which I am quoting from in this chapter, *The Complete Henry Bech* (2006).

collection makes perfect sense, I would argue that Updike's representation of the cultural other in "The Bulgarian Poetess" is more subtle and sympathetic than in the other two stories, bearing traces of certain fondness and candor which are only partly present in "Rich in Russia" and almost completely missing from "Bech in Rumania." In other words, Updike's first take on dramatizing his experience behind the Iron Curtain seems to lack the sharp wit and, at times, quite merciless mockery that can be found in his subsequent engagements with the Other Europe. This earnestness is evident already at the beginning of the story, when Henry Bech is described in largely sympathetic terms as a forty-something writer whose artistic powers have failed him, and who has been fixed in the status of a celebrity figure somehow against his will. Bech's decision to represent his country abroad is therefore motivated by "some faint hope of shaking himself loose from the burden of himself," rather than his American patriotism or a sense of duty (45). This escapist urge situates Bech among countless travelers for whom the act of journeying has meant not only a chance to explore otherness but also, at least for a while, the possibility of experiencing a sense of inner liberation. In this sense, Bech's transatlantic expedition entails leaving the familiar behind and embarking on a liminal journey of discovery, permeated with a feeling of "what may be." By the same token, Updike's stories follow in the tradition of travel writing; "a genre that is typically just as concerned to explore and present the subjectivity of the traveller-narrator as it is to explore and report the world" (Thompson 97). Accordingly, Bech's image of Bulgaria is inevitably influenced by his previous experience of travel behind the Iron Curtain, which, together with the baggage of preconceptions he carries along, shapes his subjective imaginative geography of "the other half of the world, the hostile, mysterious half" (44). While Bech's stay in Romania has largely confirmed the above appraisal, his initial impressions of Bulgaria seem more positive. Contrary to his expectations, Bech

finds "the restaurant open, the waiters affable, the eggs actual, the coffee hot, though syrupy" (45). Following this surprisingly pleasurable gustatory experience, Bech ventures outside to discover that the capital city of Bulgaria is "sunny and (except for a few dark glances at his big American shoes) amenable to his passage along the streets" (45). Moreover, Bech cannot help but notice that the Bulgarian women exude a faint trace of "Western chic" (45). All these elements of Bech's first morning in Sofia; a well-functioning hotel, pretty streets, and modern-looking females, give the place a sense of almost Western familiarity, which contrasts sharply with the gloomy backwardness of Romania, where the American author felt afraid and confused. The way Bech represents these two neighboring nations brings to mind John Reed's travelogue from almost half a century before, in which he juxtaposed Romania with Bulgaria to the latter's advantage. Like Henry Bech now, Reed was favorably impressed by the Bulgarian capital, finding it somewhat similar to the busy cities of North-West America.

Nevertheless, even though Bulgaria seems more Western and civilized than Romania, it still forms part of a broader rubric of Eastern Europe, or, as Updike calls it, "the Socialist world." There, "electricity was somewhat enchanted," "lights flickered off untouched and radios turned themselves on," while the telephone "rang in the dead of the night and breathed wordlessly in his [Bech's] ear" (46) or, alternatively, "rasped, in that dead rattly way it has behind the Iron Curtain" ("Bech in Rumania" 27). In addition, Bulgaria, like the Soviet Union and Romania, appears to exist in another dimension of time and space: the trolley cars on Sofia's streets seem to have been "salvaged from the remotest corner of Bech's childhood" (45), whereas the claustrophobic interior of a small Christian church is compared to "the unpleasantly tight atmosphere of a children's book" (53). In all the stories, there exists a persistent

connection between Bech's infancy and the places he visits, as if by traveling through

post-war Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, Bech traveled also back into his own

past; "the remotest corner" of himself. As a result, the foreign space becomes removed

from the present moment and frozen in time, like an old-fashioned sepia photograph or

a dated movie that has been stopped midway—an image which is as visually gripping as

it is reductionist. In other words, the world behind the Iron Curtain is represented as, to

borrow Arpad Szakolczai's striking notion, permanently liminal, i.e. suspended between

past and present, infancy and maturity, East and West.[83] Although the scholar employed

it to theorize the condition of communist Eastern Europe; "the long-term intermediate

position of the region between East and West, and the further suspension of normality

due to a prolonged war situation" ("In a Permanent State" n. pag.), I find the notion

equally useful to account for Bech's recurrent conceptualization of Eastern Europe as

forever wavering between past and present. Furthermore, there is a quality of unrealness

to Eastern Europe, and an uncanny Alice-like sensation of having crossed the looking

glass: "At times, indeed, Bech felt he had passed through a mirror" (46). In fact, mirrors

are mentioned at different stages of the story, implying that the reflected image may

provide insight into the way selfhood and otherness are negotiated. Significantly, the

mirrors which feature in "The Bulgarian Poetess" differ from one another: one is a

floor-to-ceiling glass pane in front of which young ballerinas practice their intricate

moves; the other is a threshold through which a princess has to leap in order to meet a

wizard in a ballet performance, whereas the third one is "a dingy flecked mirror" dimly

reflecting the capitalist world (45). Hence the mirror is not just a panel of hard glass, but

also a liminal gateway to the place where the other resides. Having crossed the liminal

threshold of a mirror, Bech realizes that behind the Iron Curtain "everything was similar

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[83] The notion of permanent liminality appears in Victor Turner's works but it is Arpad Szakolczai that elaborated it in his writings.

but *left-handed*" (46, my emphasis). In other words, Eastern Europe is a reflection of the West, yet it is not an exact image but one that is necessarily distorted, as if the dark shadow of the Iron Curtain has dimmed the colors and altered the shapes. However, the story toys with a possibility of bridging the gap between the two sides of the looking glass. It is in "this remote and abused nation," that Bech encounters "the central woman:" the poetess Vera Glavanakova (47). Unexpectedly, Bech's infatuation with Vera leads to the most authentic and heartfelt cultural dialog of all, unmarred by diplomatic obligations and political tensions. Moved by "a romantic vertigo" (51) Bech tells Vera about the way he writes, or wrote before he has lost the ability to produce new work. In doing so, he finally achieves what he has not been able to do so far: reach a deep understanding with the cultural other, despite the boundaries separating them.

Yet the spell is broken when Petrov, Bech's guide in Sofia, declares that in Bulgaria, given its unhappy history, there is no place for such a "formally sentimental fiction" as Bech's American writing (57). The remark is sufficient to bring back old antagonisms: "If there was one thing that irked Bech about these people behind the mirror, it was their assumption, that, however second-rate elsewhere, in suffering they were supreme" (57). Interestingly, Bech's refusal to divide people into those who suffer (Eastern Europe) and those who do not (America) does not prevent him from essentializing the latter and thus reconstituting a mental Iron Curtain which has temporarily dissolved between him and Vera. Although Bech makes sure that Vera is invited to his farewell party at the American embassy, he fails to reach her both physically and metaphorically as he becomes "(...) surrounded by America: the voices, the narrow suits, the watery drinks, the clatter, the glitter" (59).

Toward the end of the story Updike returns to the liminal metaphor of the looking glass. This time, however, it conveys a sense of a lost opportunity: "[t]he mirror

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had gone opaque and gave him back only himself" (57). Bech's final words to Vera poignantly express the impossibility of a romantic relationship and, in a broader perspective, a lasting transcultural connection. The poetess, and the world she belongs to, remain locked up behind the (iron) mirror,[84] and Bech's tender feelings are not enough to melt the hard surface. In fact, he does nothing to keep Vera by his side, for he realizes that the two halves cannot be reconciled:

Dear Vera Glavanakova –

It is a matter of earnest regret for me that you and I must live on opposite sides of the world (59).

3.5. Tour de Trauma: "Bech in Czech"

Although Updike's 1964 tour of the Eastern Bloc had included a visit to communist Czechoslovakia, it was not until 1986 that he dramatized Prague in his fiction. It is hard to say how much of the 1960s experience there is in "Bech in Czech," for, as Adam Begley reports in the latest biography of the American author in 1986, the year in which the story was published, Updike was again invited to the Czech capital. He went there as a guest of Bill Luers, an American diplomat who had taken care of him in Russia, and at least two events from this trip are chronicled in "Bech in Czech" (Begley VII). At the same time, it is noteworthy that in "The Bulgarian Poetess" there is a reference to "a freckled embassy wife in Prague" (51), who later makes an appearance in the Czechoslovak story. Accordingly, it is tempting to wonder why Updike had waited almost two decades before he fictionalized Czechoslovakia. I venture to think

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[84] The image of the Iron Curtain transforming into a mirror is explored by D. Quentin Miller in his analysis of "The Bulgarian Poetess" (*John Updike* 206), while the idea of an "iron mirror" is captured in Joseph Benatov's dissertation: *Looking in the Iron Mirror: Eastern Europe in the American Imaginary, 1958-2001* (2008).

that the reason for this belated interest might be related to the wave of Western fascination that swept over Czechoslovakia and other Eastern European countries, particularly Poland, in the 1980s. For one, Updike's alleged literary rival, Philip Roth,[85] dramatized Prague in his fiction first in 1977 in *The Professor of Desire* and then again in *The Prague Orgy* in 1985, while Updike's good friend Joyce Carol Oates published a series of short stories based on her travels to Berlin, Warsaw, and Budapest in 1984. Suffice it to say that when Updike wrote "Bech in Czech," the country had been on Western lips for some time now. The counter culture which emerged following the brutal pacification of the Prague Spring reform movement inspired the imagination of those unencumbered by the Iron Curtain. Havel's impassioned struggle for freedom and Kundera's poetically political fiction earned Czechoslovakia a prominent place in the Western intellectual mind, contributing to the conceptual shift by which, I argue, Czechoslovakia gradually transcended the somewhat confining and pejorative mental category of Eastern Europe, and began moving in the direction of a realm which seemed more culturally varied and intellectually stimulating—Central Europe. This only goes to show that in American imaginative geography of Eastern Europe some countries were valued higher than others, that is to say, they were considered more interesting and therefore worth writing about. This was clearly the case of Czechoslovakia in the eighties.

The tone of the story brings to mind the West's reverent attitude to the oppressed culture of Eastern Europe, embodied by such prominent figures as the critic George Steiner. Unlike the works discussed so far, "Bech in Czech" is interspersed with historical details (the Thirty Years' War, the Habsburg Empire, and the Holocaust) as well as facts related to the Czechs' national struggle for freedom (the Prague Spring,

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[85] I will discuss the case of Czechoslovakia in more detail in the section devoted to Philip Roth's real and fictional travels to Prague.

Charter 77). Whereas in the previous stories irony and absurd prevailed, this one is more solemn; as if Updike's customary wry sense of humor seemed improper in the face of the country's dismal fate. The historical references together with the subdued tone give the story a slightly didactic air. Rather than laugh off the absurdities of communism, as he did in "Rich in Russia" or "Bech in Rumania," Updike is serious about the damage that communism has done to Czechs, as well as deeply sympathetic to their cause:

> *The wish to be part of Europe*: the frustration of this modest desire formed the peculiarly intense Czech agony. To have a few glass skyscrapers among the old cathedrals and castles, to have businessmen come and go on express trains without passing through pompous ranks of barbed wire, to have a currency that wasn't a sham your own shop owners refused (…)—this was surely not too much to ask after centuries of being sat on by the Habsburgs. But this was denied: having survived Hitler and the anti-Hussites, the Thirty Years' War and the Counter Reformation, the Czechs and Slovaks had become ensnared in the Byzantine clutches of Moscow Communism, that bad spell that never lifts (315-16).

In light of Updike's previous engagements with Eastern Europe, this impassioned plea is quite remarkable. Two decades later, the Soviet Union is no longer a "lovable paranoid giant," not to mention a tender "Mother Russia." After many years of the Cold-War deadlock, America's favorite adversary has been reduced to "Moscow Communism," the system which, as the above passage poignantly demonstrates, has proved to be as oppressive as some of history's greatest tyrants. Its biggest fault is that it has deprived the people of Czechoslovakia of the life that in the West passes for ordinary: fundamental civil rights, basic public facilities, and free-market variety. To

enjoy all this is to be, according to Updike, "a part of Europe." It would seem that the American author has learned the lesson which Milan Kundera tried to teach to the West in "The Tragedy of Central Europe." However, Kundera's rationale is based on the conviction that the countries like Czechoslovakia and Poland had always formed part of Europe, and it was only through the imposition of communism that they were pushed eastward. Updike, in contrast, does not consider Eastern Europe to be Europe at all. Despite all his heartfelt sympathy for these abused nations, he identifies "Europe," with Europe proper, that is non-communist part of the old continent, relegating Eastern Europe to some kind of civilizational limbo, which is not synonymous with Soviet Russia yet cannot be equaled with the better half either. That said, Updike's reasoning is different as far as Czechoslovak culture is concerned. Eastern Europe might be marginal in terms of politics and economics, but it is *Central* when it comes to literature, which keeps flourishing against all odds: "the Russians could not quite seal off this *old heart of Europe* as tightly as they could, say Latvia or Kazakhstan" (315, my emphasis). This is obviously due to the activities of dissidents, both at home and abroad, and the phenomenon of samizdat, which receive considerable attention in the story.

One of the high points of "Bech in Czech" is a dissident party to which Bech is taken by the American ambassador and his wife. The gathering provides him with an opportunity to meet Czech authors, and confront his situation as an American writer with their lot under communism. Faced with a writer that has been persecuted for his art, Bech, who has never felt truly confident about his writing, feels cowardly and inadequate: "How would Bech, Bech asked himself, stand up to having his fingernails pulled? He could think of nothing he had ever written that he would not instantly, gladly recant" (316). Similar feelings flood Bech when the Embassy asks him to sign copies of his works for the Czech readers. To Bech's astonishment, the turnout is impressive even

though the police are taking photographs of those who have taken the risk of meeting the American author. Such act of bravery leads Bech to question the value of his fiction and his role as a writer. When set beside Czech works, Bech's books seem "petty and self-indulgent," while his idea of being a writer has nothing to do with sacrifice and persecution: "the purpose of the artist is to indulge himself, to amuse himself, to get his books into print with as little editorial smudging as possible" (314).

Adding to Bech's chagrin, the American ambassador requests that Bech be initiated into the mysteries of samizdat. Conveniently, the lesson is given by a young female, "a sexy dissident," who explains the laborious process to Bech, illustrating her words with an artifact—a real samizdat volume (317). Holding the samizdat publication turns out to be an almost religious experience for Bech, as he is "returned to some archetypal sense of what a book was" (318). Bech's compassion for dissidents and his admiration of samizdat seem so sincere that we might be tempted to think that John Updike has succumbed entirely to Western spectacular representation of Eastern Europe as oppressed and suffering under Soviet tyranny, which Joseph Benatov ironically termed "tamizdat mentality." Nevertheless, a close reading of the story reveals that there are some fine yet perceivable cracks in this image, as Bech fails to register that his vision of Czechoslovakia might be based more on what he has expected it to be like than the actual place. Accordingly, it turns out that the dissidents he meets at the party are not young beatnik-like types, but people who "had grown middle-aged in protest, in dissidence, and moved through their limbo world with a practiced weariness" (315). By the same token, Bech is forced to revisit his image of official writers ("old, with hairy ears and broad Soviet neckties") when they prove to be younger and more energetic than the weary dissidents (327). Moreover, it is noteworthy that the ambassador's attitude to Czech culture lacks Bech's deference. In fact this "Akron industrialist" and a

fervent Republican finds the post-1968 Czechoslovakia to be a boring place; "an occupied country (…) with no responsibility for their own fate" and thus "nothing intellectually interesting" about it (324). As an intellectual, Bech thinks quite the opposite, yet he does not correct the ambassador for he realizes that it is power, rather than dissidence and samizdat, that excite the diplomat. This goes to show that images of alterity are contingent not only upon pre-conceived ideas and expectations, but also the nature of the spectant. Although Bech and the ambassador share a common nationality, their perceptions of Czechoslovakia are different, because they reflect the men's individual agendas: intellectual and political, respectively. In a broader perspective, the hetero-image of Czechoslovakia, like the rest of the European East, is not homogenous but oscillates between several representations, reflecting the characters' preoccupations, as well as American national concerns at the time.

Yet the problem of representation is not limited to the Czech other; the story provides also insights into the way Americans are perceived behind the Iron Curtain. Bech feels inadequate not only because he deems his art to be less valuable than banned literature, but also because he senses that he is *expected* to act in a certain way; to be an American "emblem of hope" for this desolate nation. If Czechs are perceived as downhearted and oppressed, Americans are supposed to be quite the contrary: cheerful and lighthearted, just like the ambassador who fits the stereotype of *homo americanus* perfectly. When Bech and his hosts are denied entrance to the cemetery where Franz Kafka is buried, the ambassador exploits Czechs' hetero-image of America to get in. Although Bech is uneasy about the man's "playful and shameless aggressiveness" with which he approaches the graveyard workers, waving the American flag for additional effect, the ambassador's wife dispels his doubts: "(…) after a couple of years with Dick, nothing embarrasses me; he's just very outgoing. Very frontal. It's his way, and people

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respond to it. It's how they think Americans ought to act. Free" (310). To Bech's surprise, it is not the ambassador's influence but Bech's renown as an American author that opens the gates to Kafka's burial place. It turns out that the young workers are avid fans of Bech's writing which for them encapsulates quintessential Americanness. "R-r-r-r-rum, *rroom*" is the sound uttered by one of the boys to express the "primitive energy" and the "raw love of life" which Bech's American fiction conveys, and which the Czechs find so truly *"americanish"* (312).

Whereas two decades ago Bech was happy to flaunt his "super-American manner" to counterbalance the Soviet adversary, now he is reluctant to be perceived from the angle of nationality. This change demonstrates that mutual images may indeed vary over time. During more than twenty years which passed between the publication of "Rich in Russia" and "Bech in Czech" mutual perceptions have undergone a considerable change, reflecting political tensions on the global arena. The face of the Cold War has changed and Bech/Updike no longer feels obliged to keep up the appearances of cultural diplomacy. Accordingly, he is not afraid to take sides and denounce communism, albeit from the point of view of an intellectual:

> Communists hate maps. Why is that, Bech wondered. Why do they instinctively loathe anything that makes for clarity and would help orient the human individual? He wondered if there had ever before been regimes so systematically committed to perpetuating ignorance. Then he thought of another set: the Christian kingdoms of medieval Europe (325).

Twenty years earlier Bech found little intellectual stimulation in Romania and Bulgaria. However, in Czechoslovakia of the 1980s he feels quite overwhelmed by dissident culture. The story is permeated with respect if not envy for dissidents in general. Given the cultural condition of Czechoslovakia, Bech feels that his audacious Americanness is

out of place in Prague, and the more he is identified with a typical American author resembling "not, of course a rock star but with a touch of the same diabolic glamour" (313), the more he tries to distance himself from this representation, as if the lightness of being associated with the West were quite unbearable in the country where people have "little to smile about" (308). However, by exposing Bech's inferiority complex with respect to Czech dissidents, Updike also makes a larger commentary on American literature and his own non-political fiction. In a 1982 interview, Updike passionately protested against the prejudicial comparison between dissident works and seemingly trivial American fiction made by his friend George Steiner. To make his point Updike went as far as to announce that he preferred reading Bellow to Solzhenitsyn, even if the former "[was] only writing about a kind of disturbed, philosophical guy who keeps getting into run-ins with cops and former wives" (qtd. in D. Q. Miller, *John Updike* 129). As I hinted in my discussion of "Bech in Rumania," Updike read and admired Soviet and Eastern European writers, but he was cautious of equating political agendas with literary quality and, most of all, "romanticiz[ing] literary bravery at the expense of undervaluing American literature (D. Q. Miller, *John Updike* 129). I revisit this argument in detail in chapter 5 in relation to Philip Roth's engagement with the dissident circle of Prague.

Although the auto- and hetero-images dramatized by Updike altered over time, there are some significant similarities in the way the foreign space is mapped in Henry Bech stories. Throughout this chapter I have attempted to show how the past provides a key to conceptualize the East. Starting with his journey to Soviet Russia, Bech felt as if he traveled back in time, recognizing traces of his long-forgotten Jewish childhood in the rich smells of the victuals served on board Aeroflot. In Romania, he was reminded of a school bully, whereas the Bulgarian landscape took him back to the "remotest

corner of his childhood." The same pattern is true also for Czechoslovakia, except for the fact that this time the American author revisits his youth rather than infancy: "Bech felt taken back to the relatively innocent days in America when the young were asking only for a little more freedom, a bit more sex and debourgeoisation" (31). Nonetheless, Updike's treatment of the past in this story is not limited to Bech's personal antecedents but encompasses collective history of the region as well. Importantly, the relative innocence of Jewish life before the war, which Bech reminisced about in Russia, gives way to a much more somber tone as Czechoslovakia brings him close to the most tragic landmark in Jewish history: the Holocaust. Although the Shoah has been on Bech's mind already in Romania, where his subliminal fear of anti-Semitism has assumed the form of the menacing chauffer, the story does not engage explicitly with the Holocaust. In contrast, I argue that "Bech in Czech" is constructed around the cultural memory of the Holocaust, and the historic past of the region is equally significant as the communist present in the project of representing the Other Europe.

The *dark* shadow of the Second World War looms large over Bech's sojourn in Prague from the very beginning of the story. As it turns out, the American Ambassador's Residence where Bech takes lodgings was built by a Jewish banker who had to abandon the country in flight from Hitler back in the 1930s. If Moscow was redolent of the glorious Jewish presence in the region, Prague is a living symbol of the void left by those who perished in the Holocaust. Significantly, nowhere else has Bech been so acutely aware of his Jewishness as in the Czech capital, though he realizes that "[f]or a Jew, to move through post-war Europe is to move through hordes of ghosts, vast animated crowds, that, since 1945, are not there, not there at all—up in smoke" (307). Prague is thus mapped as a haunted city within a mutilated body of the war-ravished Europe, where the Jewish absence "makes a great hole that no one mentions"

(307). Paradoxically, the Czech capital does not show any outward traces of its tribulations,[86] yet "the feathery touch of the mysteriously absent is felt on all sides" (308). To put it differently, Jews are still present in their absence. The picturesque Jewish architecture of the city's old town takes on a deeper significance on realization that the synagogues, the cemetery, and the Town Hall had all been preserved by Hitler as a ghastly reminder of the exterminated population. Like the astronomical clock which "still runs backwards, to the amusement of tourists from both sides of the Iron Curtain" (308), Bech's thoughts wander back to those who died before "the Germans arrived and death became mass production" (310). Thus, on seeing Kafka's family grave he is struck by his own mortality: "It all struck Bech as dumbfoundingly blunt and enigmatic, banal and moving. Such blankness, such stony and peaceable reification, waits for us at the bottom of things" (311).

In Bech's eyes, Prague is a ghostly *locus magicus*,[87] where historical truth blends in with fairy-tales and legends; where Hitler, who "kissed the princess and made all her bad dreams come true," is now "becoming a myth, like the Golem" (319-21). The American author's customary ironic distance is to no avail, since it cannot shield him from the uncanny effect the city is exerting on him. Not only does he feel unworthy and inadequate next to the dissident authors whose politically-minded art towers over his "trivial" American fiction, but he is also overpowered by the "historical fullness of Prague" (330). To Bech's astonishment, he discovers that he is frightened of Europe and the tricks it plays on his subconscious. In an almost gothic fashion, Prague is imagined as a menacing monster lying in wait for Bech's life, as "[t]he huge bowls in his palace

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[86] Indeed, Prague architecture suffered relatively little damage in comparison to other European cities.

[87] The city's extraordinary atmosphere is extolled in *Praga Magica* (1973) by Italian poet, novelist, and academic, Angelo Maria Ripellino. In combining history, literature, art and esotericism, Ripellino represents Prague as a "transhistorical and supratemporal phenomenon" (Thomas 3).

bathrooms" turn out to have "voracious drains," while the city's palimpsestic architecture hiding layers and layers of history "afflict[] Bech like a void, a chasm" (330-31). Bech's fear is twofold. Being a Jew, his vision of the Other Europe is inevitably framed by the cultural memory of the Holocaust which Bech internalizes to such a degree that he imagines himself sharing the fate of millions of Jews who perished in gas chambers. Unexpectedly, Bech's defense strategy is to hold on to America. Although Bech's feelings for his homeland have never even come close to Harry Angstrom's unshakeable patriotism, Updike uses the American author as a mouthpiece for voicing a comparison which seems as blunt as if it came from Rabbit: "America has its rough spots—if the muggers don't get your wallet, the nursing homes will—but it's still a country that never had a pogrom" (330). In order to domesticate the cultural other, Bech distills the "essence" of each country, reducing them to schematic qualities. Thus the United States of America is pictured as slightly mischievous but basically trustworthy and good-natured, while Eastern Europe emerges as puzzling and vicious. But the visceral fear which Bech experiences in Prague is also related to his writerly ego. As Derek Parker Royal observed, Bechiana is very much about constructing and representing identity. Throughout his travels around the Eastern Bloc, Bech has carried along a number of selves which, like a piece of clothing, he would put on or shed depending on the circumstances. Thus in the Soviet Union he was "super-American;" in Romania he refused to don the garb of the cultural ambassador, while in Bulgaria, moved by romantic love, he dared to bare his, supposedly, real self. Now, however, more than twenty years since his debut as John Updike's second best literary creation, Bech senses that the garment is getting more and more threadbare, and his author "might want to set him aside, to get him off the desk forever" (331). As his anxiety grows, Bech starts speaking in tongues. Whether the Anglo-Czech passages at the end

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of the story are just a postmodernist trick intended to capture his author's waning attention, or a sign of madness possessing Bech in the foreign land, the final impression of Eastern Europe is that of fear: "His panic felt pasty and stiff and revealed a certain shape. That shape was the fear that, once he left his end of the gentle arc of the Ambassador's Residence, he would, like millions up in smoke before him, cease to exist" (334).

3.6. Conclusions

"Bech in Czech" is particularly interesting from an imagological point of view. On the one hand, the story recycles several elements of Bech's imaginative geography of the Eastern other which have surfaced in the previous stories. On the other, it challenges some of them, attesting to the way mutual perceptions altered during the twenty-year period separating the stories. This is particularly visible in the case of the Soviet Union, which is pictured as the dominant presence on Bech's mental map and the main contender against which the United States is set. In "Rich in Russia," the hetero-image of the Soviet Union is deeply embedded in the Cold-War rivalry, and the relationship between the superpowers is mapped in terms of binary opposites. At the same time, Russia is "homely" enough to function as a departure point for comprehending Sovietized Eastern Europe. In Romania, Bech feels confused and scared precisely because the country seems to him different than Russia: alien and menacing. Thus the fears and fantasies triggered by the unknown become projected onto the threatening figure of the Romanian chauffer, resulting in a representation which casts Romania as backward and dangerous: a site where little has changed since the times of legendary Dracula. If Romania is demonized, then Bulgaria is romanticized by Bech.

Just as the demonic chauffer provides a lens to read the Balkan nation, Bech looks at Bulgaria through the eyes of a beautiful poetess. Using the liminal metaphor of a looking glass, the story toys with a possibility of love bridging the gap between the two worlds, yet the Iron Curtain proves to be an insurmountable obstacle, not just in a physical sense but also as a mental barrier.

If both countries are cast as largely marginal in comparison with mighty Russia in the 1960s (while Russia stands on its own, Romania and Bulgaria are represented through symbolic figures of the chauffer and the poetess, respectively), twenty years later Czechoslovakia is *the* place to be. Relegated to the backend of Europe, Prague is nonetheless a prominent cultural force and an intellectual center of Eastern Europe, to the point that it causes Henry Bech to feel inferior—an image which at once echoes and challenges the West's blanket admiration of dissident writing as somewhat simplistic and unfair to American literature. In addition, the largely sympathetic vision of the Soviet Union entertained in "Rich in Russia" gives way to an explicitly anti-communist discourse.

As the stories attest to the changeability of national tropes, they also demonstrate that in representing the European East, Updike draws repeatedly from the same repository. In particular, ethnicity is crucial in the process of mapping alterity. Bech's Jewish background has bearing on his perceptions of the foreign space from the very beginning of his journey to the East. In a sense, by traveling from the Soviet Union to Eastern Europe, Bech revisits Jewish history writ large: turn-of-the-century Jewish culture, European anti-Semitism, and finally the Holocaust. At the same time, physical travel is also a symbolic journey into Bech's personal past, particularly the writer's childhood. Using past as an interpretive tool for understanding the cultural other domesticates the foreign space to some extent, but also removes it from the present

moment, resulting in a representation that is inevitably reductionist. The world behind the Iron Curtain is thus mapped as grayer, gloomier, and considerably less developed than the West. Out of the four countries visited by Bech, only the Soviet Union can bear comparison with the United States of America, yet even Russia falls behind Bech's homeland in terms of development. However, sociological realities of the Communist Block are of little importance to Henry Bech, for, as a writer, his imaginative geography of the area is animated by fantasies and desires, and these are contradictory to say the least. While Bech's venture behind the Iron Curtain might not be transformative in the Turnerian sense of the word, it does offer a liminal kind of experience rich in strange and unexpected occurrences. Among others, the American author becomes rich, revisits his infancy, falls in love with a Bulgarian, and almost loses his mind in Prague. The European East is thus mapped as a site of possibility, where the most unlikely scenarios unfold. At the same time, it is also associated with personal and collective trauma, as evidenced in "Bech in Rumania" and "Bech in Czech."

Updike's personal reflections on the Eastern Bloc reveal that the fears and desires projected by Henry Bech's American self onto the four nations mirror the author's own feelings. In the following passage, communist backwardness is juxtaposed with Western European comforts with the aim of demonstrating why the United States of America is in fact "the distinctly better mousetrap:"

> After my weeks of quaint Communist drabness, Swiss efficiency and prosperity looked like a science-fiction movie. Or was it the little leaks of fear that would show while I was in Communist countries, the spurts of steam betraying the underlying pressure—suddenly impassive expressions, quick lapses into French to evade the eavesdropping walls, a burst of real, scurrying terror from my escort when it appeared I had lost my passport? I had never before been in countries

where people were afraid of their own government—where everything, in a sense, every motion of the mind and heart and pen, was politics ("On Not Being a Dove," n. pag.)

The above appraisal is particularly revealing not only because it shows us how much personal experience went into Henry Bech's fictional adventures behind the Iron Curtain, but especially because it manifests Updike's distinctly pro-American stance, clothed in his customary style for an added aesthetic effect. Therefore, the European East emerges as a mirror-image for American concerns, as America's national identity is constructed in opposition to the communist hemisphere, whereas American culture is measured up against its Eastern European counterpart. In other words, by being reflected in the iron mirror, Updike's already favorable auto-image of the United States of America is consolidated and even positively reinforced.

However, in the stories this binary relationship is complicated by Henry Bech's Jewish-American perspective, and the fact that in straddling cultural and ethnic variety America may be termed a major liminal space itself. In this sense, Jewish-American culture is a hybrid in that it deconstructs the binary logic of self and other in order to make space for interactions between old forms and traditions, and new influences and experiences. As such, it constantly evokes and draws from Eastern Europe, because it is where the roots but also the grave of Ashkenazi culture is. Accordingly, the European East is at once a Jewish-American other, as in the Romanian story, and an integral part of it, as in "Rich in Russia" and "Bech in Czech;" a truly liminal construct of exclusion and inclusion.

In a word, besides casting light on the project of inventing the European East from the perspective of cultural diplomacy, Updike's stories provide also valuable

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insights into a complex dialectic between auto- and hetero-images, problematized by Henry Bech's "hybrid" self.

4. Joyce Carol Oates

Unlike John Updike's Eastern European stories, those written by Joyce Carol Oates have received relatively little scholarly attention, particularly from the perspective of the Cold-War dynamics. In this chapter, I attempt to bridge this gap. First, I provide a brief critical-biographical sketch of the American author, focusing on those thematic threads that run through Oates's fiction and permeate the stories under discussion. In doing so, I hope to shed some light on the inner geographies of the novelist, which are later reflected in her Eastern European narratives. In addition, I contextualize Oates's works by offering some background information on the transnational travels/encounters which inspired these stories.

Most critical discussions of Joyce Carol Oates start with a reference to the author's copious oeuvre. Indeed, Oates is regarded as one of the most prolific American authors, with an artistic output amounting to more than fifty novels, thirty-eight short-story collections, twelve novellas, a large number of plays, poetry volumes, books for children and young adults, edited volumes, and an impressive selection of critical work.[88] Together with her husband, Raymond J. Smith, Oates established a literary journal, *Ontario Review*, which had been published for thirty-four years, until Smith's death in 2008.

Oates has experimented with a wide range of literary forms and techniques, among them gothic fiction, mystery novel, romance, and historical novel, to name but a few. The same is true for her thematic concerns. In her fiction, Oates has visited such varied milieus as Hollywood in the 1950s in *Blonde* (2000), in which the author inhabits

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[88] Oates's productivity has come under sharp criticism many times. Tellingly, in 1982 *Harper's Magazine* published an article titled sarcastically: "Stop Me Before I Write Again: Six Hundred More Pages by Joyce Carol Oates." Recently, there has even been a social-media controversy over the author's extensive and at times polemical use of Twitter.

the mind of Marilyn Monroe, or the boxing ring, which is the subject of an eloquent book-length essay on one of America's favorite sports: *On Boxing* (1987).

In addition to being one of the towering figures of American literature, Oates is also a veritable "artist in residence," as the critic Eileen Teper Bender called her, teaching creative writing at Princeton University since 1978. Although Oates has been much praised for her remarkable talent and artistic versatility, her extraordinary productivity together with a predilection for tenebrous, taboo themes have been a source of prejudice on the part of critics and scholars, to the point that, perhaps, she has not received as much serious critical attention as her oeuvre deserves. In John Updike's words, "[s]he has (…) rather overwhelmed the puny, mean-minded critical establishment of this country. Single-mindedness and efficiency rather than haste underlie her prolificacy; if the phrase 'woman of letters' existed, she would be, foremost in this country, entitled to it" (*Odd Jobs* 329-30).[89]

Oates was born in Lockport, New York in 1938 to working-class parents, Carolina and Frederic James Oates. The author speaks warmly about the loving and emotionally-secure atmosphere of her family home, yet growing up in a rural working-class environment of Lockport was also marred by some painful and violent episodes. At school Oates experienced bullying and sexual molestation, and the history of her family testifies to tough realities of early twentieth-century America. Importantly for this dissertation, there is a genealogical connection between Oates and Eastern Europe. Her maternal grandparents, Stephen and Elizabeth Bush ("Büs" in Hungarian) immigrated to the United States from Budapest in 1902. The couple settled in Buffalo,

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[89] Nevertheless, Oates, now in her mid-seventies, continues to write with the same unrelenting energy and confidence, in defiance of negative voices and critical opinions. Only in 2014 she published an almost five-hundred page novel called *Carthage*, as well as two short-story volumes: *Lovely, Dark, Deep: Stories, and High Crime Area: Tales of Darkness and Dread*. In addition she is the editor of an anthology of prison literature*, Prison Noir* (2014). As Oates's homepage, Celestial Timepiece, reveals, there are already a number of works scheduled for publication in the near future. Clearly, "Oates's faith (…) is not in art as a refuge from life but as integral to it" (Cologne-Brookes, "Introduction" 387).

New York, in an area already populated by immigrants from Hungary, Poland and Germany, but life in the New World turned out to be far from easy. Oates's biographer Greg Johnson blames "[t]he clash of languages and cultures, combined with heavy drinking and the frustrations of poverty" for Stephen's violent behavior, which reached a tragic finale in a tavern brawl during which he was beaten to death (*Invisible* 3). Oates's grandmother was left with nine offspring, the youngest of whom, Carolina, had to be taken care of by Elizabeth's sister.[90]

The life history of Blanche Morningstar, Oates's beloved paternal grandmother, reveals even greater hardship. Blanche was born in a Jewish family but her parents had changed the German-sounding surname "Morgenstern" to the conventionally American "Morningstar," in a symbolic denial of their Jewish background. Blanche got married but she was soon abandoned by her husband who left her on her own with a baby boy— Oates's father Frederic. Pressed by financial circumstances, she was forced to move back with her parents who were not only struggling to make ends meet but whose marriage was marred by episodes of jealousy-induced violence.[91] Many years later Oates fictionalized Blanche's traumatizing experience and the problem of rootlessness in her gripping novel, *The Gravedigger's Daughter* (2007). The latter issue is also dramatically explored in one of the stories discussed in this chapter; a novella-sized "My Warszawa: 1980," whose protagonist is an American author of Jewish extraction.

I have not traced these details from Oates's family history without reason. Critics agree that childhood memories, images, and impressions have informed Oates's writing, infusing it with a singular blend of tenderness and brutality. While Oates has

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[90] Oates's mother grew up with an acute sense of estrangement from her own family. Her childhood and adolescence years coincided with the Great Depression, denying her access to further education and forcing her to work physically instead. Later, Oates's would attend the same one-room school as her mother did, but her own educational path proved to be dramatically different from Carolina's.

[91] Tragically, Blanche was the one to witness the apogee of her parents' harrowing relationship. In a bout of violence, Blanche's father murdered his wife and then committed suicide.

inhabited the minds of characters coming from all social strata, "her real loyalty is to the embattled working class" (White 396). The author mythologized her family background in many of her works, turning the rural milieu of Lockport into a fictional "Eden County," which, as the author herself affirmed, it was not: "It's pretty bad as a matter of fact" (qtd. in G. Johnson, *Invisible* 20). Accordingly, Oates's portrayal of childhood is frequently tinged with darkness, while her characters have either suffered from a harrowing experience or are going through a trauma.

It was in these early years that Oates developed a penchant for the safe haven of the library and the gratifying company of books—an intellectual asylum in the midst of the violent world outside. In turn, these early habits set the stage for Oates's career as an author and an academic. Eileen Teper Bender has stressed Oates's profile as an intellectual whose writing is deeply informed by her scholarly insight, balancing "an artist's sense of possession and inspiration with a critic's remedial and analytic power" (xii). This, according to Teper Bender, is just one of several contradictions that Joyce Carol Oates engenders. The author has often puzzled critics—not only with her ever-expanding oeuvre whose sheer size may impede analyzing Oates's body of work in its totality, but also her wide-ranging experiments in terms of form and technique. As hinted at the beginning, Oates has never limited herself to only one genre, successfully embracing different variants of prose, poetry, and drama. She has also experimented with diverse narrative conventions, again to the dismay of critics who have not been able to put her "in her conventional literary place" (Teper Bender 2). Accordingly, Oates has been variously placed within the tradition of realism and neo-naturalism, even though the author's fictional locale often lacks a sense of history and tradition, functioning more as a universal dreamscape than a realistic setting. That said, Oates's writing is nonetheless deeply rooted in contemporary America; its history, mindset, and

culture. Indeed, Oates is regarded as a thoroughly American author, and she herself admitted that America is her home and the place of her soul: "[I]f I wrote novels set elsewhere, they would be from the perspective of an American in any case" (Cologne-Brookes, "Written" 553).

As much as Oates is a chronicler of contemporary America, her focus is always on the microcosm of the self and the way its fears and desires reflect the broader context of socio-political realities. An excellent example of this interdependence between the personal and the political is a 1992 novella *Black Water* in which Oates dramatizes the infamous Chappaquiddick scandal involving Senator Edward Kennedy. Rather than pass judgment on the world of high politics and class privileges, Oates uses the incident to explore the essential: hope, fear, ambition, desire, and ultimately life and death. The confining space of the drowning car in which Kelly Kelleher is trapped is thus a vehicle for representing life in all its fragility. While memories of the past and glimpses of the future keep sliding before Kelly's dying eyes she still hopes, as we do, that the Senator will come to her rescue and the tragic destiny will be reversed. But *Black Water* is more than a study of an individual. Although Oates said that she was not interested in the Kennedy connection, the public is inextricably linked with the private, gradually getting into the picture from the moment Kelly meets the Senator at the party, just like the black water is slowly yet steadily filling up the space of the drowning car. As Gavin Cologne-Brookes emphasizes, *Black Water* is Oates's take on American national culture:

> The Senator and Kelly each behave in ways that dramatize contradictions of
> their cultural context. *Black Water* captures the conflicts of turn-of-the-
> millennium America, torn between the straightjacketed, sexist hierarchies of its
> Puritan origins and the dangerous drift that self-determinist laissez-faire morality
> seems to engender (*Dark Eyes* 183).

The senator does not come back to save Kelly. Nor did Ted Kennedy return to help Mary Jo Kopechne out of the death-trap of the drowning car. In fact, he did not even report the accident, pleading post-traumatic stupor. Customarily, Oates does not judge, but she has her "dark eyes"[92] firmly set on America and will not avert them no matter how painful or violent the sight is.

Kelly Kelleher is one of many Oatesian heroines whose very existence is circumscribed by gender-related social rules and unwritten moral codes. Although Oates's fiction has always been concerned with women's issues and expressed sympathy and support for feminism, she has resisted the label of "woman writer."[93] Therefore, while the social roles and configurations that gender imposes on people form an integral part of the intricate tissue of the author's fiction, it is the personal will that is of most interest to Oates, as it is what shapes her characters' paths, driving them either toward doom or some kind of salvation (G. Johnson, *Joyce* 43). It is no coincidence that Gavin Cologne-Brookes places Oates's writing within the tradition of American pragmatism. As much as her characters are determined by the social realm, Oates's vision stresses "the importance of individual behaviour as the only way to facilitate the improvements in collective behaviour" (*Dark Eyes* 5). Accordingly, although Oates is often perceived as a "violent" author unafraid to peer into the darkest corners of contemporary America, the critic refuses to classify her as pessimistic. Her constant self-development together with her penchant for artistic risk-taking and experimentation testify to the unrelenting spirit and personal will that always push her and her characters

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[92] *Dark Eyes on America* (2005) is the title of Gavin Cologne-Brookes study of Oates's novels.

[93] Nevertheless, the most vigorous scholarship on Oates's writing has to do with her relation to feminism (Cologne-Brookes, *Dark Eyes* 1). Given Oates's thematic concerns, feminism often seems like the right framework to analyze her works. However, even if some of her most compelling characters are women, they are frequently "possibly mad, obviously bad and assuredly dangerous to know," which "may account for the occasionally troubled relations Oates has had with normative feminism, inevitably a discourse of uplift and enlightenment" (Gates Jr. 545). In this connection, Ellen G. Friedman contends that Oates's feminism is visible not only in her portrayal of female agency, but also in the way her fiction maps the evolution of hegemonic masculinity over time.

forward into unknown, often precarious regions. Sometimes these journeys end in failure, but the movement forward never ceases: "When Oates's migrants end their physical flight, it is because they are paralyzed by repeated assaults. Outwardly aphasic, they may nonetheless continue on a torturous and relentless inner journey" (Teper Bender 2). The short stories which are the object of my analysis combine these two types of travel. Featuring educated Americans temporarily immersed in Eastern-European capitals, the stories recount journeys which are physical; the protagonists travel to specific geographical locations in the Old World, but also spiritual, since the foreign setting often triggers some sort of self-discovery or even personal transformation.

A few words are due with respect to the literary form which Oates selected to represent Eastern Europe. Although the writer is best-known for her novels, short stories are central to her work. Unlike many authors, she did not start writing short stories as a prelude to larger fictional forms—they have always been created alongside novels. In fact, critics have tended to value her stories higher than her novels, considering her one of the masters of American short fiction (G. Johnson, *Invisible* 311).[94] Importantly, Greg Johnson, who studied Oates's engagement with this narrative form in detail, observed that the author "has clearly found in the short story a genre particularly congenial to the protean and relentlessly experimental nature of her creative impulse," and Oates herself remarked that short stories embody freedom and promise, allowing for the kind of experimentation which might not work in a novel (3). At the same time, Oates's collections are carefully and consciously organized, which turn them

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[94] Oates's dedication to the genre is manifested by an impressive number of short-story collections. Since 1964 she has been publishing them every two or three years, and from 2006 onward there has been a collection almost every year. Many of her short works received prestigious awards and honors, like the O. Henry Award which she was granted almost every year for over three decades. Combining the writer's experience with the expertise of an academic, Oates has written extensively on the short story and served as editor of several anthologies, the latest being *The Oxford Book of American Short Stories* (2nd ed.) from 2012.

into self-contained vessels of the writer's "larger vision (…) of a chaotic social reality underlain by a profuse but random universe of natural forms" (G. Johnson, *Joyce* 5). Accordingly, the short story should not be regarded as a secondary outlet of Oates's creative powers but rather one of her favorite literary forms, particularly well-suited to the author's artistic vision and her unflagging creative powers.

As mentioned earlier, although Oates's works are often concerned with different kinds of migration, most of her writing is rooted in American landscape which Oates finds to be a fascinating and never-ending well-spring of inspiration. The short stories which I set to analyze in this chapter deviate from this tendency to focus on the domestic by being set mostly in communist Eastern Europe. It is noteworthy that Oates did not travel to Eastern Europe privately. Instead, her journey formed part of a larger political framework. Oates, just like her friend John Updike, visited Eastern Europe under the auspices of the U.S. Information Agency. The complete itinerary covered Frankfurt, Warsaw, Budapest, Oslo, Stockholm, Helsinki, Brussels, Antwerp, and Berlin, but it was communist Eastern Europe that most stimulated Oates's imagination, making her pour her impressions of Berlin, Warsaw and Budapest onto paper.

The tour was scheduled for May 12th 1980 and was to last six weeks. At the time Oates was working on her next novel, *Angel of Light* (1981), and she was worried that such a long journey would seriously interrupt her work. However, it proved to be "productive in its own way" (G. Johnson, *Invisible* 298). For Oates, the trip constituted a load of social obligations; "innumerable luncheons, banquets, and receptions," but she admitted that she met some "*wonderful* people" (qtd. in G. Johnson, *Invisible* 298). Importantly, it also provided her with a unique opportunity to reconnect with her European heritage—Oates's maternal grandparents emigrated from Budapest at the turn of the century to settle in the United States. Although Oates's Hungarian roots got

"ignored, or denied, or repressed" during most of her life, her visit to Budapest provoked an uncanny feeling of ethnic affinity with Hungarians and a strong sensation of being "at home" (qtd. in G. Johnson, *Invisible* 1-2). At the same time, Warsaw made her aware of her Jewish roots. As mentioned before, Oates's beloved grandmother Blanche was a Jew whose parents had taken a conscious decision to erase their Old-World identity on coming to America.

During her trip, Oates was taking notes that would later serve as the basis for several stories based on her Eastern European experience. The stories, grouped under the title "Our Wall," form part of a two-section collection entitled *Last Days: Stories*, published in 1984. The first section, "Last Days," comprises narratives set in Oates's domestic environment—rural and urban America. In Brenda Daly's assessment, both sections "mirror each other in a variety of ways," as well as "move us, literally and figuratively from the United States to Europe" (87). Interestingly, "Our Wall" contains also two stories which are not directly concerned with Eastern Europe, but which I have decided to discuss here given their subject matter and its implications for my argument. Accordingly, I offer a detailed imagological reading of "Détente" which dramatizes Soviet-American differences in the context of cultural diplomacy. Given the remote, Third-World setting of "The Lamb of Abyssalia," the story is not analyzed in a separate section, but I do mention it as part of this chapter's conclusions. In order to demonstrate how these stories are interconnected and hark back to one another, I have decided against examining them in a strict chronological order, favoring instead a reading which stresses connections between Oates's representations of foreign countries. As with John Updike's short stories, my analysis is informed by imagology in that it focuses on the way Eastern other is imagined in Oates's fiction, and on what this representation tells us about the American spectant. At the same time, I employ the concept of

liminality/liminal space to illuminate the image in question. As the reader will find out, some of the stories lend themselves to liminal analysis more than others. By being set in the United States of America, "Détente" lacks the element of a transatlantic journey which is crucial for my treatment of Eastern Europe as a liminal experience located beyond the ordinary and the familiar. Nevertheless, I find the story to be thought-provoking and productive in its own way. Using Oates's journal as an important source of information and impressions, I analyze "Détente" from an imagological point of view, comparing and contrasting Oates's personal feelings toward the Soviets with her fictional take on mutual hetero-images, with the aim of demonstrating how cultural stereotypes shape the characters' actions.

Western enlightened intellectuals traveling to Eastern Europe tended to chart their own mental maps of the region, joining certain countries together and excluding others. In "Our Wall," Eastern Europe is represented by Berlin, Warsaw, and Budapest. Even though Oates did not visit the Soviet Union, "Détente" captures the climate of Soviet-American cultural relations at the time. Importantly, Oates's fictional map is limited to capital cities—a strategy used also by John Updike and replicated in most of the works discussed in this dissertation. Unlike Updike, Oates did not conceive an alter ego to convey her impressions of Eastern Europe. Instead, each story has a different protagonist. However, there is a sense of coherence to the stories, as a minor character in "My Warszawa: 1980" is the protagonist of "Old Budapest," while "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" and "Our Wall" share the same theme. As the title of the following section suggests, the organizing metaphor of Oates's peripatetic stories is the motif of the wall, both as a tangible physical barrier and a boundary in the mind, but also as a liminal space in its own right.

4.1. Liminal Dynamics in "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" and "Our Wall"

Although the opening story, "Ich Bin Ein Berliner," takes place in West Berlin which technically lies *outside* Eastern Europe, the city is mapped as a liminal paradox which pertains to the West but would not exist without the East. Oates's focus is on the most spectacular embodiment of the Iron Curtain: the Berlin Wall. The story is narrated by an American who comes to Germany a year after his brother had been shot down for approaching the Wall from the East. His mission is to carry out an amateur investigation involving meetings with the deceased's acquaintances and State Department employees, in order to unearth the reasons behind his brother's perplexing conduct. However, each attempt at solving the puzzle is thwarted, as the bits and pieces he manages to collect refuse to form a coherent picture. The fragmentary narrative is reflected in the structure of the story. "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" is divided into blocks of text which beat out an irregular, almost spasmodic rhythm, mirroring the narrator's frantic search for truth. In a cinematic fashion, we follow the American as he moves through the German capital trying to piece together the events which led up to his brother's death. However, rather than find the answers he is looking for, he becomes gradually engulfed in the oppressive atmosphere of the city, inadvertently following in his brother's footsteps.

As we accompany the narrator in his topographical exploration of Berlin, we also follow the way in which the city gradually imposes itself on his psyche. In order to better understand this representation, it is necessary to consider the significance of the German capital within a broader framework of the post-war American imaginary.

In "America's Berlin 1945-2000," Andreas W. Daum argues that following World War II the German capital became "embedded in America's own political mythology, closely linked to what was defined as the United States' unique mission in

the world" (56). Although the American image of Berlin retained negative connotations related to Nazi ideology, the events of the Blockade, the Airlift, and most importantly the erection of the Berlin Wall contributed to the formation of another, much more positive representation of the city as "America's Berlin." In other words, West Berlin became associated with American values of democracy and freedom in the midst of the totalitarian East.

In "Ich Bin Ein Berliner," Oates both draws on and debunks this cultural imagery. West Berlin, with its bustling energy and tourist frenzy, is represented as a city so Western that the narrator has difficulty in determining whether he is in America or Germany: "It is America. But no it is Berlin. West Berlin. Germany. But no it is America. No? Yes? America? But with such strong accents?" (100). Yet "freedom" in West Berlin seems to be less related to politics than to sexuality—the cityscape is populated by flashily-dressed prostitutes, and dotted with revues, saunas, cabarets and sex-shops offering all kinds of hedonistic pleasures. This crude image in which Americanness is equivalent to hedonism and consumerism ("[o]dors of grease-fried foods, spilled beer, the companionable blare of American acid rock (…) ruddy thug-faces cruising in their Mercedes" (102)) destabilizes the Cold-War version of American exceptionalism, casting West Berlin as a city which is *Western* in a pejorative sense of the word. From this perspective, President Kennedy's famous caption, "Ich bin ein Berliner," which is also the title of Oates's story, acquires strikingly different overtones. As Daum points out, the impassioned words which Kennedy uttered in West Berlin in 1963 were aimed "less at the Berliners themselves and more at situating Berlin in a much broader context" (56) of the freedom-loving, democratic world, whose emblem was the United States of America. In other words, in resisting communism with the help of Americans and standing for democracy in the totalitarian East, West Berliners

assumed the role of "the Americans of Germany" (Daum 55). In Oates's story, this line of thought is represented by the State Department officials to whom West Berlin represents "the jewel afloat upon the sea of darkness" which merits American protection, because "an armed attack on Berlin is precisely the same as an armed attack on Chicago or New York or Washington" (109). However, the conflated imagery of "America's Berlin" is challenged by the narrator of the story who, in a reversal of Kennedy's message, declares that he is neither "a Berliner" nor "an American—in the *allegorical* sense" (100, my emphasis). In doing so, not only does he resist the official Cold-War narrative of America's Berlin, but also refuses to embody emblematic Americanness, which in the story is defined in opposition to the narrator's brother who deviated from the stereotype of a *positive* American by developing a "*morbid interest* in Berlin, and in German history, and in the Wall" (100). Importantly, Oates problematizes this "allegorical" representation, by focusing on the narrator's "un-American" obsessive fascination with the Berlin Wall.

As much as the narrator wishes to distance himself from his late brother's "morbid interests," he cannot escape Berlin's uncanny appeal. The city is mapped as a site of contradictions in which crude "earthly delights" coexist with traces of the past era, most notably the skeleton of the Kaiser Wilhelm Church which still bears the scars of the 1943 bombing raid. In spite of the breezy atmosphere of the main street, Hardenbergstrasse, with its hotchpotch of "Old World charm, marching songs, Salon Massage," history seems to be creeping in through elusive, barely-there allusions to the Second World War and the Holocaust. Oates gradually builds up a sense of entrapment, infusing seemingly innocuous objects and incidents with deeper meaning. Accordingly, the narrator is transfixed by the sight of "marvelous gleaming pyramids of shoes" (102) distantly evoking the ceiling-high piles of shoes stored behind the glass panes at

Auschwitz Concentration Camp Museum. By the same token, the name of the hotel where the narrator is staying, "the Berliner Hospice," connotes death and suffering, whereas his room is depicted with bellicose metaphors as a "sealed capsule, a bunker" with a ventilation system "which might from time to time emit its subtle gases" (105). The feeling of physical and mental oppression culminates in the man's dramatic cry, which is a clear reference to Nazi gas chambers: "O, help, I know you are listening, is the doorknob riveted in place?—are the poisonous gases being filtered in?" (108).

The way Oates invests her image of Berlin with war-time references attests to the impact which World War II and the Holocaust exercised on American representations of this part of Europe. As Waldemar Zacharasiewicz observes in *Images of Germany in American Literature* (2007), from the 1960s onward American fiction and cinema conveyed a negative image of Germany, concentrating on "the dark German past and its relics in the present" (141). In this sense, Oates's story forms part of an imagological tradition of projecting the fascist past onto Germany's present; a trope which Zacharasiewicz has termed "[t]he 'look backward' towards Nazi Germany" (180). Nevertheless, as much as the city is charged with the memory of Nazism, it is also curiously ahistorical at the same time because of the Wall.

In "Disintegrating Communism: The Normative Site of the Berlin Wall," Andaluna Borcila employs the word "liminal" several times in order to capture the Wall's intermediate location between the opposing political systems of East and West, as well as to emphasize its status as a "liminal site, at the threshold between a Cold War and emerging post-Cold War imaginary" (24). While the latter meaning is related particularly to the televised moment of symbolic disintegration of communism through the destruction of the Wall and the subsequent movement of Easterners toward the West, both uses foreground the Wall as a site which is not only a boundary but also an

in-between space in its own right, or, to borrow Jesús Benito Sánchez and Ana Manzanas's words, "a threshold of unpredictable dynamics" ("Of Walls" 2). Thus, the Wall embodies the condition of in-betweenness in more than one way, functioning as a physical barrier separating two territories, but also as a site representing the ideological divide between communism and democracy. Particularly the latter condition was productively exploited by Western Cold-War rhetoric in order to articulate "the division between East and West in political/spiritual/economic terms" (Borcila 23). From this perspective, transgressing the Wall, which is the central theme of Oates's story, was perceived as an escape from the confinement of the East to the freedom of the West. Since the outcome of such venture was never certain, the Wall operated as a liminal site of danger and possibility; success meant freedom while failure might have been punished with death.

Importantly, Oates reverses the "standard" configuration by portraying Americans, rather than Easterners, wishing to transgress the Wall. In doing so, she explores the liminal dynamics of the Wall beyond the Cold-War context. Seen from the safe distance of nocturnal West Berlin, the Wall seems to be merely "a dotted line on [a] tourist map" (101). However, at approaching the site "the distant fantasy" (101) acquires material presence, assuming a form which is "very smooth and monotonous and modern" (106). In addition to these contradictory readings, the Wall is also a symbol of political tensions between East and West, which, however, does not make it any more real, for according to the twisted Cold-War logic "if West Berlin does not exist from the perspective of the East, the Wall (…) does not exist, from the perspective of the Allies" (105). Conspicuous in its absence, yet present as a constant reminder of the narrator's brother's death, the Wall is thus portrayed as a paradox of presence and absence, inclusion and exclusion; a limen where past and present are fused in an almost

indistinguishable blend: "As one nears the Wall the curious thing is, history is left behind. There is nothing here to indicate what year this might be, which language might be spoken if there were anyone at hand to speak…" (106).

In deleting the historical context, Oates allegorizes the Wall, turning it into a universal symbol of separation; "*The Wall is forever*" is the message left by the narrator's brother. At the same time, the Wall is also an allegory of human existence as it represents the perennial struggle between life instincts, understood in terms of sexual drive, and death instincts:[95]

> Consider the eternal wisdom of the groin which opposes that of the Wall: for the Wall is Death. No mein Herr, I believe you are mistaken: the Wall is Life (…). For, as one approaches the Wall, even from the "Western" sector (…) note how the pulse helplessly quickens (…), note how the heart grows tumescent, how vision is sharpened, the very air rings with delight (110).

The impression that the Wall and, by extension, Eastern Europe, is an unreal space existing beyond time and history is heightened by the use of a legend-like narrative at the end of the story, in which the Wall transforms into a tower dungeon erected by a cruel landowner to imprison wrongdoers "[o]nce upon a time, in the remote days of the Holy Roman Empire" (111). The only escape route is a narrow opening through which daylight and sounds of the outside world enter the prisoner's cell. Although no one has ever made it out of the dungeon, the lure of freedom makes prisoners seek escape and inevitably die in the attempt, for, as the legend's moral goes, human drive toward freedom is oblivious even to death.

Although this "folk wisdom" (112) seems to offer a symbolic rationale for his brother's high-risk conduct, the American's research remains inconclusive. He does not

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[95] It is significant that Sigmund Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1921) is the text that the narrator's brother had been reading before his death.

ascertain whether his brother's death was an accident, a suicide, or a political gesture, but he does come close to comprehending his obsession with the Wall by experiencing its tantalizing, almost sexual appeal himself: "Death silently and secretly and ceaselessly pulses. One touch—! One touch" (111).

It is noteworthy that despite being concerned with the material embodiment of the Iron Curtain, "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" does not reveal what the world behind the Wall is like. From the perspective of the West, the "East" is vaguely imagined as a site of terror and surveillance and those who live there are reduced to the status of prisoners. This one-sided representation is, seemingly, counterbalanced by the last piece in the collection, "Our Wall," which harks back to the opening story by offering the opposite perspective. Although references to "The Wall," "the Forbidden Zone," and "the War" all point to East Berlin, neither time nor place are specified. It is, however, suggested that the Wall had been erected so long ago that nobody questions its presence any more: "It is far easier (…) to assume that the Wall is eternal, that it ever was and ever shall be" (234). In the story, Oates creates a dystopian vision of the future in which the division between East and West has turned permanent and the Berlin Wall/Iron Curtain has never collapsed. In hindsight, Oates's representation seems to be but a harmless piece of science-fiction, yet in 1982, when the story was first published, there might have been a prophetic ring to it.

Like the Berlin story, "Our Wall" is told in the first person by a nameless young man whose age remains indeterminate. Although at first we are led to believe that he is just a child, later he hints that his birthday is approaching and he will be eighteen soon. As the story progresses, further details regarding the narrator and life in the dystopian land are revealed, confirming the reader's premonition that "Our Wall" is in fact a thinly disguised story of East Berlin's Soviet occupation. Several of the events evoked

in the story bear a striking resemblance to real-life occurrences. Notably, Oates fictionalizes some of the most spectacular elements of Eastern Europe's hetero-image, such as the tragic death of Peter Fechter, an eighteen-year-old German youth who was shot down for attempting to scale the Wall, and alludes to the *modus operandi* of the Soviet repression system. In foregrounding human drama, Oates fosters a representation which corroborates the vague vision of the East entertained in "Ich Bin Ein Berliner." Thus, East Berlin/Eastern Europe is imagined in terms of eternal confinement, where repression has been internalized to such a degree that it is no longer perceived as such. Those who cast it into question suffer terrible consequences, just like the narrator's late brother, who lost his life in an attempt to defy the regime by seeking to escape into the world behind the Wall. In this sense, Oates's engagement with the East falls in line with the Western spectacular conceptualization of Eastern Europe as tyrannized by the "Evil Empire."[96] Moreover, by setting the story in an indeterminate time and space the author transcends the context of the Cold War, fossilizing Eastern Europe into a universal stereotype of captivity. As was the case with the Berlin Wall, the dystopian space portrayed in "Our Wall" is thus allegorized as a symbol of oppression and suffering. Importantly, the liminal paradox of the Wall is still on Oates's mind in the last story of the collection. In fact, the narrator's very existence revolves around the Wall and its possible meanings, as he spends "long minutes, long unrecorded hours at a time," contemplating the Wall which seems to him at once "[m]esmerizing and boring and beautiful" (237).

Does "Our Wall" offer insights into how the East imagines the West? Since the Wall prevents any contact with those on the other side of the barricade, the West remains a matter of speculation. As preposterous as these "popular theories" (238) may

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[96] This phrase was used by President Ronald Reagan to refer to the Soviet Union in his 1983 address to the National Association of Evangelicals in Orlando, Florida.

seem, some of them evoke highly stereotyped cultural imagery of the Cold-War period. Accordingly, one of the theories has it that the world beyond the Wall is a paradise, while another likens Westerners to a degenerate brother-race. These conflicting narratives are somewhat mitigated by the last hypothesis, which casts the West as "an ordinary world behind The Wall—our own world, in fact—but it is a mirror-image, a reversal" (239). The latter image evokes the familiar trope of a mirror, which has been employed by John Updike in his engagement with Eastern Europe. Although it seems to stress affinity between the two worlds, the idea of the West in reversal connotes in fact a place so diverse from the East that "[n]one of us [Easterners] could survive in it" (239). In this light, the story's disheartening conclusion: "The Wall was, and forever will The Wall endure" (241) refers not only to the futility of the narrator's attempt to subvert the unchangeable order by approaching the Wall, but also fixes East and West in the narrative of irreconcilability; a message which seems even more final if we bear in mind that it constitutes the last words of the whole collection. However, the story invites also more philosophical readings. As the American writer Erica Jong observed in her review of *Last Days*, in "Our Wall" Oates "reaches beyond realism to create, in metaphorical terms, the philosophical underpinnings of all walls" (n. pag.). Along similar lines, Daniel L. Zins detaches the story from the Cold-War framework, situating it instead within a broader context of interpersonal relations: "The inspiring events of 1989 notwithstanding, only the continuing unfolding of history will disclose how many of us can heal the enormously destructive self-divisions that *wall us off* from, and often cause us to demonize, our fellow human beings" (188, my emphasis). In light of Zins's post-1989 interpretation, the Wall is no longer a barrier separating East and West, but it continues to epitomize the boundary in the mind preventing us from seeing the other person as he/she is, without prejudice. As the following discussion of "Détente" will

demonstrate, cultural stereotypes also operate as such invisible "walls in the head," which may be harder to break than bricks and mortar.

4.2. Dramatizing Boundaries between East and West: "Détente"

Although the title of the story refers to the easing of Soviet-American tensions between 1967 and 1979, "Détente" problematizes the relationship between the two countries by dramatizing boundaries between East and West. It should be noted that even though the story was not inspired by Oates's journey behind the Iron Curtain, it is based on an authentic cultural event in which Oates participated. In the spirit of détente, in April 1978 the Charles Kettering Foundation organized a Soviet-American Writers' Conference to which Oates was invited as one of the representatives of American authors.[97]

As the novelist's journal reveals, Oates took time to prepare for the event, reading Russian poetry (Mandelstam, Akhmatova, and Mayakovski, among others) and contemplating the condition of contemporary Soviet authors. Oates admitted to feeling particular sympathy for Andrei Sinyavsky, a Russian writer sentenced to several years of "corrective" labor for writing allegedly anti-Soviet fiction—a judgment which met with vehement protest from many American intellectuals. Yet in the view of the upcoming conference, where Oates was to meet "established" Soviet authors, she was most interested in the tensions between the official and the subversive:

Perhaps there are writers—perhaps there are many writers—who maintain an inner, secret self without sharing their knowledge with anyone at all. One could be, almost, a member of the Writers' Union, writing and mouthing their

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[97] The conference was also attended by John Updike, William, Styron, and Kurt Vonnegut, among others.

propaganda-drivel, while maintaining a secret self all the while. . . . But the strain of it, the guilt at such hypocrisy, expediency . . . ! That would be crippling, I should think. And if there were others involved, families, children. . . . (243).

These reflections become particularly telling in the context of "Détente." Not only do they demonstrate that Oates's preoccupation with the self outweighs her interest in the political, but also anticipate one of the tensions explored in the story. Importantly, it was through reading and thinking about Russian authors that Oates first envisioned "Détente," turning her reflections on the public/private dichotomy into a plotline:

Thinking of a short story involving a Soviet writer . . . a former dissident, who has been imprisoned…but who has a family back in Russia; who is consequently vulnerable. He would be confronted with a very shallow sort of American, perhaps an interviewer, someone like Tom Wolfe . . . all "style," no substance. Or should the American be a woman. . . (244).

Given the official character of the conference, Oates was initially wary of meeting the Soviets, expecting most of them to be "mere party hacks" (244). Oates's journal makes it clear that she would rather meet proscribed authors. As much as she disapproves of a "[t]ypical diplomacy, hypocrisy" of inviting official authors while "the dissidents and the criminals are in exile or in prison," she is well aware of the fact that her feelings must not be known, for the mission of the Soviet-American encounter is to "stress a positive rapport" (243). Surprisingly, the conference turned out to be, in Oates's words, "one of the most interesting and memorable experiences of [her] life," though one that was also "difficult to assess" (*The Journal* 245). Oates was positively impressed with several members of the delegation; their friendliness and appreciation for her work. She notes that two men were particularly attentive to her: Yassen Zassoursky, Dean of Journalism at Moscow University, and Mykolas Sluckis, a Lithuanian writer who did

not speak English. Although Oates was quite taken with Zassoursky, whom she described in superlatives, as a "quick-witted, charming, wonderfully friendly person" (247), his attention was disturbing to her. Despite the Dean's congeniality, Oates found it difficult to countenance the official line of thought represented by Zassoursky. This is how the author expressed the clash between her feelings and convictions: "At heart it's an old, elemental paradox: how can people whom you like, for whom you feel actual affection not be people of whom you approve... How can you like someone who is, or might easily be, repressive, cruel, even murderous...?" (247).

Despite certain wariness, Oates's appraisal of the Soviets cannot be termed negative. Rather, it entertains ambivalence, as the Soviets are portrayed as oscillating between conflicting representations. In what follows I set out to find out if the ambiguity which characterizes Oates's attitude to the Eastern other is reflected in "Détente."

Mirroring Oates's experience in cultural diplomacy, the story centers on Antonia Haas—an American author invited to a Soviet-American Conference on Literature. Antonia's frail physique; "small, slender" with "pale green eyes" and "dead-white skin" (...) brings to mind Oates's own slim frame, yet, unlike her creator and in a manner reminiscent of John Updike's Henry Bech, Antonia is a blocked novelist whose controversial essays on literature, art, and culture serve as "substitutes for the novel she couldn't quite write" (119). Having acquired, somewhat against her will, a reputation for being critical and aggressive, Antonia is "constantly meeting distorted images of herself—visions of 'Antonia Haas'" (119). Indeed, at the Soviet-American event the chairman of the Soviet delegation assumes that Haas would be a man. The author's fragile self-image is further enfeebled by an intermittent relationship with her husband Whit, "a rather aggressive non-writer" (118), who has the habit of walking out on

Antonia in moments of distress. Antonia's troubled personal situation leads her to seek refuge in her public identity as a writer, which is the reason why she accepts the invitation to the Soviet-American gathering. In this sense, she resembles Henry Bech whose professional travels are motivated by personal reasons; providing a temporary respite from the burden of himself as well as a chance "to encounter fictional selves, the refreshing false ideas of you that strangers hold in their minds" ("Bech in Czech" 313). Although the story lacks the liminal element of a transatlantic journey, meeting the Soviets carries the possibility of getting to know the *self* by confronting it with the foreign other.

For the purposes of this dissertation, Oates's portrayal of the Soviet delegation through Antonia's American eyes is especially interesting, because it reflects several conflicting, hetero-images of Russia. Most notably, this collection of Russian national types includes the chairman of the delegation, Yury Ilyin, who is depicted as a hardline neo-Stalinist; a ruthless political manipulator who speaks of brotherhood and understanding with "the appeal of the bully, the murderer" (129). While Ilyin is said to keep the delegates, which are identified as mostly apparatchiks, "'on a tight rein' and 'under the iron glove'" (123), there is one person who eludes the category of a subservient and morally bankrupt party hack, making "the mutual suspicion of East and West (…) the outmoded vocabulary of the Cold War" seem "exaggerated, inflated, made into a sort of melodrama" (122). Soviet writer Vassily Zurov, whose works have not been translated into English and who is thus unknown in the West, is the most mysterious of the delegates. Antonia is immediately fascinated by the Soviet's impassioned manner of speaking and his tormented countenance which reminds her of "a divinity student out of a Russian novel; one of the demons of Dostoyevsky's *The*

Possessed" (115).[98] Vassily's otherness is reinforced by the exotic sound of spoken Russian; "a barrage of sounds, utterly alien; a virtual windstorm; poetry in motion," which seems like "a language of giants, of legendary folk" to Antonia's ears (115). Moreover, a rumor has it that at some point in his career Vassily got into trouble with communist authorities. Although his presence at the conference precludes his being a dissident, Antonia clings to this notion, picturing him as defiant and passionate. Drawing from the storehouse of Western cultural imagery of Russia, she imagines him as an embodiment of a timeless Russian character: "the quintessential Russian— peasant-turned-divinity-student-turned-revolutionary" (116). Vassily's "quixotic" contribution—"What Are the Humanistic Values of Present-Day Literature"—adds to this idealized representation, reminding Antonia of certain abstract "speculations about life, art, and the meaning of the universe" which she indulged in as an adolescent (116). If Russia is vilified through the character of Ilyin, Vassily is the embodiment of a mysterious Russian soul and the country's turbulent history. Reminiscent of Dostoyevsky's tormented protagonists, he is endowed with certain personal depth and complexity, in addition to a spirited temperament and a nonconformist streak. In other words, both men complement each other as each constitutes one side of what William L. Chew termed "Janus-like" imageme, i.e. a representation which is not homogenous but straddles "compounded polarities" (Leerssen, "Image" 344). Such a liminal image of Russia has been already signalized in connection with John Updike's "Rich in Russia," where the country is represented as wavering between two narratives: one reflecting Bech's private ethnically-invested perception of Russia as timeless and homely, while the other accounting for the Cold-War grids of power between the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. Analogously, Antonia's perception of Russians is layered,

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[98] In 1978 Oates wrote an essay on Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, which was first published in the fall issue of *The Georgia Review* and later collected in *Contraries: Essays* (1981).

encompassing political despotism encapsulated by Ilyin on the one hand, and Vassily's spiritual sublimation on the other.

Moved by Zurov's apparent idealism, Antonia thinks of him as a kindred spirit capable of understanding her despite some obvious boundaries separating them—most notably the language barrier. However, it is not until they have a translated conversation that she realizes that the Soviet's views are incongruous with her own. In other words, it becomes clear that the kind of spontaneous and instinctive transnational *communitas*[99] that Antonia has envisaged is unfeasible. Far from being an ignorant apparatchik, Vassily nonetheless conforms to the Soviet idea of art as intrinsically political;[100] a view which Antonia is not willing to accept. Although such dissonance of opinion casts a shadow on her romanticized image of the Russian, the couple's mutual attraction continues, culminating in a passionate encounter in Antonia's hotel room. Importantly, the scene is preceded by a long day of speeches and discussions which turn increasingly "abrasive, even churlish" (125) gradually revealing mutual antagonisms between Soviet and American delegates.

Particularly the subject of dissidence proves to be a bone of contention between both parties, causing Antonia to reflect upon the Soviet forms of punishing disobedient artists by sending them off to "[l]abor camps, prisons, mental asylums" (128). Projecting her sympathetic feelings toward dissidents onto Vassily, she imagines him as a man who "had been harshly punished, frightened, coerced into adopting at least the outward gestures of non-rebellion" (128). Therefore, when the two meet in private she steps into the role of a tender and protective female ready to "heal" Vassily's battered

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[99] As explained in chapter 1, *communitas* is a term used by Victor Turner to refer to a deep interpersonal connection based on common values, which may emerge in liminal situations.

[100] Importantly, it is not the dogma of social realism that Vassily defends, but rather art's universal ability to "alter human consciousness" (124). Joyce Carol Oates seems to share this view. Speaking about her idea of "morality" in art ("[i]n general, what is life-enhancing seems to me moral; what is destructive to life, immoral"), she proclaimed that "[a]rt is always political, however obliquely" (Cologne-Brookes, "Written" 549).

soul and save him from further tribulations. Even though the spiritual union between Antonia and Vassily is not consummated (the telephone rings ominously the moment Vassily is about to kiss her), Antonia spends a sleepless night thinking of Vassily and envisioning their future together.[101] Yet in the light of the day her feelings for the Soviet undergo a dramatic transformation. Suddenly, Vassily's "exuberant Russian manner" begins to irritate her, while his "fond broad smile" seems to her "both anxious and proprietary" (131). In other words, the Soviet's exoticism and otherness, which have seemed so fascinating from a distance, turn out to be too foreign and diverse from Antonia's American perspective, ultimately frustrating their cross-cultural connection.

As the story nears the end, any feeling of affinity between East and West is irretrievably lost. The final session of the conference turns into a bitter clash between communism and capitalism, as the Soviets juxtapose state-controlled economy with a degenerate "marketplace ideology where everything is for sale, everything is to be peddled" (133). Along similar, highly antagonistic lines, the Soviet side invokes wartime experience to aggrandize differences between the two nations. Accordingly, Americans are accused of "ignorance masked as innocence" because, unlike Russians, they have not been victims "of the madman Hitler!" (133). The event culminates with a heated argument on the issue of dissident writers, whom the Soviets regard as criminals and enemies of the state. For the Soviet chairman, the subject serves as an excuse to condemn American brand of "liberal imperialism:" "—why do you imagine that your views of human rights and freedom must be ours? Why do you even wish to think so…?" (134).

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[101] By envisaging a romantic rapport between Antonia and Vassily, Oates's story partakes in a long-standing Western literary and cinematic tradition identified by Choi Chatterjee: "While a majority of American commentators criticized the repressive political systems of both the tsarist and the Soviet empires, this widespread disapproval of the ruling regimes coexisted with a latent longing to create meaningful emotional relationship with individual Russians and to participate in select Russian cultural and ideological milieus" (88). In the story, Antonia replicates the cultural pattern by falling for a Russian "revolutionary" type, despite the fact that she is deeply critical of the political values represented by his homeland.

While "Détente" seems to stress the irreconcilability of East and West, Oates's personal account of the 1978 Soviet-American Conference attenuates antagonisms between both nations by emphasizing the delegates' cordiality and friendliness. Although several scenes in the story mirror real events,[102] the actual assembly seems less belligerent than its fictional rendering. This view is substantiated by Yale Richmond's record of the conference in *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War* (2003):

> After presenting their polemics about the differences between the publishing industries between the two countries, the Americans and Soviets discovered how much they had in common as writers. Harrison Salisbury, the former *New York Times* correspondent in Moscow, thought it highly significant that, once the writers had completed their polemics on publishing and started to talk about writing, they discovered that they were on common ground. Salisbury, a Russian speaker, added that if he had not known the identity of the writers at the table, he would have been unable to tell, from their discussion of literary principles, who were Russian and who were American (158).

While mentioning the difference of opinion on the subject of free vs. state-controlled publishing, which is also dramatized in "Détente," the above passage is clearly oriented toward stressing similarities over differences. Regardless of the gulf between Soviet and American political systems, mutual antagonisms wane once the subject of writing is broached. In other words, literature provides a common ground between both parties; an in-between intercultural space of understanding for otherwise incompatible nations. This is clearly not the case in Oates's story, where, as the argument between Antonia and Vassily poignantly demonstrates, Soviet and American views on literature are essentially irreconcilable. Not only is the official relationship between both superpowers

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[102] For instance, Ilyin's anti-American speech seems to be modeled on the words of the Soviet chairman, Nikolai Fedorenko, which caused Kurt Vonnegut to leave the conference room (*The Journal* 278).

marred by hostility and resentment, but also the possibility of a meaningful connection on a personal level is thwarted by misconceptions and false judgments. Interpreted at face value, "Détente" perpetuates Cold-War antagonisms by accentuating East-West incompatibility, resulting not only from opposing ideologies but also intrinsically different mentalities. However from an imagological point of view and taking into account Oates's personal impressions, the story does in fact cast stereotypes and common truths as damaging to interpersonal relations. Therefore, Antonia is disappointed in Vassily because he does not conform to the hetero-stereotype of a "divinity student revolutionary" she has fixed him in (131). Although she realizes that "she was hardly in a position to pass judgment on anyone," Vassily's passivity in the face of Ilyin's diatribe fills her with anger and resentment, because it falls short of her expectations. Cultural determinism underlying national stereotypes proves to be a double-edged sword. Taking a representation for reality, Antonia imagines Vassily to be a dissident who has been coerced into obedience but remains subversive at heart, and when he fails to corroborate this view she turns away from him. Similarly, the Soviet-American conference, whose aim has been to promote cultural exchange, turns into a public display of enmity, as political tensions gradually dominate the event precluding any kind of understanding between both parties. East-West dissonance, driven by mutual stereotypes and common truths, is perhaps best illustrated with a metaphor of the consecutive translation from Russian into English: "The translator was so quick he sometimes began speaking before the Russian was entirely concluded so that, for a confused moment or two, Russian and English overlapped" (129). As the languages become blurred, the message turns incomprehensible and communication is stalled. In "Détente," Soviets and Americans not only lack a common language, but also seem to have little interest in looking beyond political narratives and cultural clichés.

4.3. Searching for the Self in "My Warszawa: 1980"

Like "Détente," "My Warszawa: 1980" is set in the framework of the Cold-War cultural diplomacy. This time, however, the mission is carried out abroad by an American writer Judith Horne, who comes to the Polish capital to participate in "the First International Conference on American Culture" (139). In this journey behind the Iron Curtain, Judith is accompanied by her partner Carl, a journalist and a former foreign service officer, as well as a number of other American "cultural emissaries" (178). However, the story centers on Judith's perception of Warsaw, and, more precisely, the influence which the city exerts on her psyche. Therefore, "My Warszawa: 1980" bears resemblance to "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" in that both stories attest to the transformative potential of travel behind the Iron Curtain.

While Antonia Haas is portrayed as self-conscious and volatile, Judith Horne seems to be quite the opposite, both in character and in appearance. Judith's strong facial features and "aggressively casual" style of dress match her reputation as "combative, analytical, severe, and resolutely unsentimental" (139). Although the word "feminist" is not used, the novelist seems to share the movement's concerns through her pursuit of professional success in a male-dominated literary environment, as well as her preoccupation with being locked in the stereotype of "womanly." Notwithstanding, it turns out that the profile of an assertive and independent woman writer is much more difficult to sustain in Warsaw than in the United States of America.

Prior to the journey, Carl warns Judith against going to Warsaw not only because "East Europe is a strain on everybody's nerves" (146), but particularly because of her Jewish background. The author ignores these warnings but as soon as she arrives in the city, it becomes clear that the Polish capital seems alien and menacing, making

her feel edgy and fragile at the same time. Although Judith has traveled widely since her twenties and in fact feels best in transit, she is not herself in Warsaw. Everything, from the native tongue to the air that she is breathing, adds up to the sense of oppression. For a person who masters words for a living, Polish language seems untamable, resembling a "dizzying cascade (…) a mountain stream breaking and crashing about her head, scintillating, teasing, utterly unintelligible" (147). Not only does the spoken language baffle her, but also Poles' body language bears no likeness to what Judith is familiar with: "[E]ven the hand gestures—lavish, stylized—confuse her. If she were in France, or Italy, or Spain—if she were in Germany—she would immediately feel at home" (147). Clearly, Eastern Europe is *not* Europe proper and the premonition that she has entered a world apart intensifies as the story progresses.

Throughout the story there are frequent references to smoke-heavy air which "stings Judith's eyes, permeates her clothing, makes her hair, her very skin smell" (143), oppressing her much more than other delegates. Together with the undecipherable language, depressing Soviet-style architecture, "shabby hotel," and "overcast sky" it makes her feel "unreal, a fiction; an impostor" (148). This self-image contrasts sharply with what Americans are supposed to be like in the eyes of Eastern Europeans: "formidable in their brazenness, their eerie invulnerability, like mythic creatures, demi-gods, or golems not quite possessed of souls" (140). By juxtaposing these two perceptions, Oates seems to be passing a comment on a broader issue of constructing national stereotypes. Poles are in awe of the Americans not only because they possess this magic ticket allowing them to move smoothly across the Iron Curtain—the American passport—but also because they represent Western freedom and affluence. In other words, being American is synonymous with being successful (140). In Andrei S. Markovits's assessment, such a highly positive representation of America

is closely linked to political realities: "Eastern Europeans' overwhelmingly positive views of America stem largely from their having perceived the United States as their sole ally against the much-despised Soviet Union" (10). Indeed, Judith conforms to this representation when she offers financial support to the Poles and promises to help them establish contacts in the West.

However, preconceptions operate both ways, and Judith's expectations of Poles, just like the Polish representation of Americans, reflect the country's position within the American cultural imaginary at the time. Therefore, when a hotel bellboy pesters her for money, Judith feels puzzled and angry, for "she has brought to this beleaguered country hazy but stubborn ideas about the "people" and their integrity" (137). Judith's idea of what Poles should be like is informed by an American hetero-image of Poland as a country of heroic, freedom-loving people—a representation inspired by Poland's substantial record of political and cultural opposition against the regime. As Thomas S. Gladsky points out, between the late 1970s and early 1980s several events of considerable global importance catapulted Poland to the international foreground,[103] which in turn found expression in literature. This is how one reviewer commented on James Michener's decision to take up Poland as the subject of his bestselling novel published in 1983:[104] "His timing is exquisite. Since 1980 Poland has been constantly in the news, and the current chapter in its rich history remains unfinished" (Schaufele n. pag.). In "My Warszawa: 1980" Oates responds to this appeal by depicting Poland at a crucial historical moment: following the emergence of the most extensive and dynamic counter-culture in the Eastern Bloc, yet right before Solidarity was established in

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[103] Most prominently, Polish cardinal Karol Wojtyła was elected Pope, while the Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa received Nobel Peace Prize. Poland gained prominence also on American home ground when Zbigniew Brzezinski became the United States National Security Advisor to President Jimmy Carter (Gladsky 158).

[104] *Poland* (1983) testifies to American interest in the country in this period. Despite its didactic slant, this historical novel spanning almost eight centuries of Polish history earned considerable popularity, reaching the number one position on *The New York Times* bestseller list.

August of 1980. Indeed, the meetings between American delegates and Poles depicted in the story stand in sharp contrast to ideologically-charged debates of "Détente." Neither do they resemble the official reunions portrayed by Updike. The only time Bech comes into contact with dissident authors is when he is taken to a private party by the American ambassador and his wife. In contrast, Judith Horne is introduced to some of the key figures of Polish independent culture. Although specific names are not mentioned, descriptions allow the reader to identify Jerzy Turowicz, the editor in chief of the influential Catholic weekly, *Tygodnik Powszechny*, regarded as an informal organ of Polish democratic opposition, as well as Stanisław Barańczak, Polish poet, translator, and literary critic, who was one of the founders of KOR.[105] These encounters lead Judith to assume that Poland "doesn't seem to be a Communist country at all," but an "occupied country" instead (156).

Nevertheless, it would be a misinterpretation to assume that the scenes involving Polish intellectuals aim at anything more than capturing the spirit of "culture under siege." Although references to actual people and places (misspelt at times) give the story a "here-and-now" quality, "My Warszawa: 1980" is more concerned with essentializing Poland as "a *tragic* nation" than chronicling the country's condition at the time (145). While political oppression and dismal standards of living ("second-rate, shoddy" goods, "long queues" and "poisonous exhaust" of public transport (161)) certainly contribute to this representation, contemporary communist realities constitute only one aspect of the hetero-image of Poland conjured by Oates in the story. Equally, if not more significant is the country's wartime experience, which, in Judith's eyes, defines contemporary Poland as much as its political system: "'Tragic' Poland. The

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[105] KOR is an acronym for Komitet Obrony Robotników (the Workers' Defense Committee) which was a Polish opposition organization aimed at defending workers persecuted after a wave of strikes in 1976, and exposing the government's unlawful actions. It was crucial for the emergence of the so-called "second circulation," regarded as the most widespread network of independent publishing within the Eastern Bloc.

Uprising of 1944, Hitler's command that Warsaw must be completely destroyed, razed to the ground. How could any Pole forget? How *dare* any Pole forget? Even the younger people—born as late as the very Sixties—refer to 1944 as if it had taken place only a few years ago" (157). Poland is thus conceptualized as a nation which continues living in the past, both inwardly and outwardly, for, as one of the characters remarks, Warsaw seems frozen in time: "[T]he Stalinist architecture, the shabby people, the long queues—the sense of time having stopped in the early Fifties, or (…) in 1944" (144). This anachronistic representation comes as no surprise if we recall Henry Bech's persistent habit of imagining the European East as permanently liminal. Moreover, as in the case of Bech, past in Oates's story has also a personal dimension, as it forces Judith to revisit her ancestry, her Jewishness.

In his seminal essay, "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage*," Turner writes about the secret knowledge or gnosis obtained in the liminal period, which is "felt to change the inmost nature of the neophyte, impressing him, as a seal impresses wax" (102). The gnosis which Judith experiences in Warsaw has to do with her Jewish heritage. Unlike other Americans depicted in the story, Judith is unable to adopt a compassionate yet detached attitude to Eastern Europe. To put it differently, her foreignness cannot protect her from Eastern Europe because, in a way, she belongs to this part of the world. Refusing to be defined by her ethnicity, Judith has suppressed her Jewish identity and the memory of her Polish relatives who had died in Auschwitz. In Warsaw, painful family history is brought to the fore, as the protagonist experiences what Homi Bhabha has termed an "unhomely moment," in which "the traumatic ambivalence of a personal, psychic history" is related to "the wider disjunctions of political existence" (*The Location* 15). The experience is at once physical and spiritual. Thinking in liminal terms, Warsaw becomes the locus of Judith's inner and outer

transformation: "Warsaw is an occupied city, an occupied zone, Judith thinks, waking, staring at herself in the dim bathroom mirror—and something is happening to her here. Is there a subtle poison in the air?" (163). Suffocating Warsaw air seems to change states, solidifying on Judith's skin in the form of "layers of grime, flakes, near-invisible bits of dirt" (178). She tries to wash it off but the city gets under her skin and no matter how hard she tries, she cannot seem to shed it. This Eastern European state of consciousness is both terrifying and moving. At one point Judith gets lost in the Europejski Hotel. For what seems like an eternity, she moves between dark, heavy-aired floors to find all the doors locked, as if in a bad dream. The locked doors are symbolic—Judith is not capable of finding the right key that would, at last, unlock this puzzle of a city. At the same time, she is deeply touched by the beauty of the rebuilt Warsaw Old Town, the misery of Polish dissidents, and even the incomprehensible language which "remains inaccessible in its beauty" (163).

Judith's vulnerability, which she has kept at bay in the safe American environment, comes to the surface in Warsaw: "She feels weak. She feels Jewish at last. And womanly—in the very worst sense of the word. A Jew, a woman, a victim—can it be?" (148). This curious gradation in which ethnicity is closely linked to gender, signalizes Oates's preoccupation with the cultural dimension of identity—one of the key themes in her fiction. As it turns out, Judith's carefully-constructed American self is not immune from either her roots or her femininity. This realization leads her to break up emotionally on two occasions—first in the company of her partner Carl ("she strikes out with her fists, sobbing like a child" (174)) and then during a meeting with a Polish journalist of Jewish origin. Particularly the latter episode merits closer attention, since, yet again, it exposes the extent to which American understanding of communist Eastern Europe has been infused by the memory of the Second World War. This is evident not

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only in the way the Holocaust serves as the axis of the story but also in references to Polish anti-Semitism. In addition to being tragically heroic, Poles are pictured as fervent Catholics for whom religion "means *Poland*. *Poland* and not *Russia*" (152). The city's topography attests to Polish religiousness. Warsaw is dotted with churches, so full that people are "overflowing out onto sidewalks" (152); young energetic priests are always seen "swinging along the streets," while ubiquitous Madonna figures peer from "niches, courtyards, (…) pedestals" (153). However, in Judith's eyes Catholicism, and Polish Catholicism in particular, carries dark overtones, for she associates it with "Jews, discrimination, mass graves, death" (152). In a conversation with Carl, Judith mentions a black page of Polish-Jewish relations; a pogrom which took place one year after the end of the War. Customarily, Oates does not pass judgment, but the tragic event, and particularly its timing is meaningful enough. Later, an anti-Semitic sentiment brings about Judith's ultimate emotional undoing. Talking to a female journalist whose face bears strong Semitic features, Judith comes to realize that the woman's family had converted to Catholicism to avoid Nazi persecution. The conversion would not be so surprising in itself had it not been for the fact that the woman is clearly an anti-Semite claiming that those Jews who had perished in the Holocaust were ignorant peasants. The woman's condescension strikes a chord in Judith because it is her and her family's identity that is being assaulted. Devastated, Judith leaves the journalist without a word in a trance-like state, her gnosis finally complete. In other words, she symbolically assumes her Jewish patrimony with its adjacent painful history as part of her American identity—a heritage which she has deliberately chosen to neglect up to now, but which she has carried within nonetheless. In this sense, Eastern Europe and Warsaw in particular becomes a liminal site in which Judith's psychological transformation is enacted; a place which, through its history, embodied in the city's architecture, Polish

language, and people's stories, triggers a process of discovery which, distressing as it is, ultimately allows Judith to embrace the Eastern European in her.

Like the Berlin stories, "Warsaw: 1980" is inconclusive. Eastern Europe functions as a liminal space and time of Judith's self-discovery but it remains to be seen if the change is lasting—whether she will take this Eastern European gnosis to another level on returning to the States. The story ends with Judith and Carl on a plane, leaving Warsaw behind and heading for the West.

4.4. Romanticizing Eastern Europe: "Old Budapest"

Quite a different image of Eastern Europe emerges from the story entitled simply "Old Budapest." The protagonist, a strikingly beautiful Marianne Beecher, is a link between this narrative and "My Warszawa: 1980." Two years before coming to Budapest, Marianne had attended the same Warsaw conference as Judith and Carl, and, as hinted in "Old Budapest," she might have been briefly involved with Carl. Officially, Marianne works for the U.S. National Science Education Foundation. However, a rumor has it that she is a secret agent traveling "about East Europe spying on foreign service people for their mutual employer, the State Department" ("My Warszawa" 156). Indeed, Marianne moves smoothly from one Eastern European diplomatic station to another, but her Eastern Europe is hardly the dark and disheartening place it is for Judith. Conveniently far from home, it provides her with an opportunity to live a liminal life free of constraints and everyday routine: "But what was quite like the queer intoxicating air of suspension, of a journey behind the 'Iron Curtain'?" (194). As pointed out in the chapter devoted to liminality, liminal time and space are characterized by the suspension of ordinary rules and norms, providing a way out of the structured normality

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of everyday existence. For Marianne, being in constant motion allows her to venture into terrains which could prove precarious in other circumstances. Untied either by family obligations or economic constraints, she glides through Eastern European capitals, exploring her "limitless capacity for romance" by engaging in impassioned affairs with other temporary inhabitants of Eastern Europe, usually high-ranking-diplomats (206). Unlike Judith, Marianne is not weighed down either by the tragic past or the dismal communist present of Eastern Europe. Although she does at times feel "a certain indefinable melancholy" and "the force of nostalgia" for "those tragic nations," their turbulent history only adds to the region's romantic allure: "The romance of East Europe (…). The tacky, seedy, despairing glamour of lost causes; the air of the fantastical and the drab; the queer elation of the American, in striding through this world, as through a twilit world beyond the looking glass" (194). The above quotation is meaningful not only because it exposes Eastern Europe as a "liminal paradox" straddling contradictory qualities of "the fantastical" and "the drab," but especially because it points to the privileged status which the American cultural emissaries enjoy behind the Iron Curtain. Like in "My Warszawa: 1980," Westerners possess freedom of movement that Eastern Europeans do not. People living in Budapest, Warsaw or East Berlin seem to be eternally trapped in this "world beyond the looking glass" with all the consequences, whereas for Americans the mirror is a fluid surface allowing them to get in and out at leisure. It is noteworthy that once again the liminal trope of a looking glass is employed to cast the region as an unreal, imaginary setting, and capture the "trans-specular" experience (Sutton, "Beyond" 140) of being an American in Eastern Europe.

While Judith feels apologetic for being American, Marianne is well-aware that her nationality and professional status grant her a number of privileges, and she takes

advantage of them with gusto. Accordingly, she makes the most of her visits to Eastern Europe, while remaining exempt from the burden of *living* there:

> She loved the embassy limousines driven by handsome 'native' drivers in uniform; she loved the crowded receptions in ambassadors' residences that had been, not many years ago, palatial Fascist headquarters; and the lavish bouquets awaiting her, in her hotels; and the long luncheons, the innumerable toasts at dinners, the secret meetings with dissidents—pouchy-eyed gentlemen in ill-fitting suits, living in furnished rooms, subsisting on translators' fees, in exile, in their own countries (206).

Unburdened by Eastern European *Weltschmertz*, Marianne prefers to romanticize the other rather than lift the (iron) curtain of cultural clichés. Therefore, Eastern Europe provides her with a charmingly scenic if somewhat quaint backdrop against which her fairy-tale life unfolds. "The air of seedy intrigues;" bellboys offering to change money "with the breathless air of offering illicit pleasures," and "telephones that rang and jangled during the night, with an exuberant life of their own" create a spectacular and titillating scenery for Marianne's romantic endeavors, conveying an impression that Eastern Europe belongs to an old movie or a spy novel. The realm's unreal character is further reinforced by Marianne's transitory status, since, as mentioned before, she is free to move between both sides of the looking glass: "That she was nearly always under surveillance by the secret police, or could imagine herself so, rarely upset her, for, *with her visa*, she was never in any real danger of arrest unless the political situation changed abruptly" (208, my emphasis). At the very beginning of the story, Marianne's Hungarian acquaintance, Ottó, mentions the controversial Hilton Inn hotel located atop Castle Hill in front of the city's most historic landmarks.[106] Anyone who has ever been

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[106] Later in the stories, Marianne leaves the shabby Hungarian hotel where she has been staying to move to Hilton courtesy of her current lover's generosity.

to Budapest will immediately recognize the imposing edifice, whose striking bronze-tinted exterior reflect picturesque Fisherman's Bastion. While those staying in the hotel may admire the spectacular scenery outside, the glass panes covering the building prevent onlookers from peering into the hotel's interior; the only thing they see is their own reflection against the city's monumental backdrop. Accordingly, Marianne is comfortable admiring and judging Eastern Europeans from the snug position of an American diplomat, while at the same time remaining sheltered from the world which lies behind the protective walls of Hilton. Budapest is thus mapped as a thrilling spectacle which takes place for Marianne's pleasure and which she may cease to watch if the performance does not live up to her expectations.

Being untouchable herself, Marianne trivializes the political dimension of one's actions in Eastern Europe. When Ottó trusts her with a mission of smuggling abroad a subversive political manuscript she says yes, but her decision is motivated more by pride than anything else: "That Ottó desperately needed her, or someone with her privileges—that he attributed to her the power of working a perceptible difference in history (…) all this was enormously appealing" (194). At the same time, she does not take the man seriously, suspecting that "Ottó exaggerated the danger of his situation (…). In this part of the world, such self-deceptions were not unusual" (196). Marianne's light-hearted attitude has weighty consequences. She puts Ottó's life in peril by letting the manuscript get stolen from her hotel room by her current lover, a man who passes for a British businessman, but who probably is a Soviet secret agent. The manuscript's title, "The Bringer of the End," alludes to Telesphorus,[107] a mythological deity "whose mission it was to escort the dead to the underworld" (219). Ironically, it is Marianne who inadvertently assumes the role of Telesphorus; however, what she brings is literally the

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[107] In the story, Oates mistakenly identifies Telesphorus with death. In fact, Telesphorus is a deity with healing powers, which brings recovery from illness or injury.

end to Ottó's ambitious project of exposing the system's atrocities. Although the story does not reveal what happens to the dissident, we may assume that Marianne's careless conduct will have dire consequences for him.

Marianne embodies the West's condescending demeanor toward Eastern Europe and other minor political players. Within American diplomatic circle portrayed in the story, Eastern Europe is synonymous with "absurd little countries" which "would be at one another's throat" if it were not for the Russians (196). Politically marginal, they are nevertheless considered to be attractive diplomatic destinations given the amount of power the diplomats are granted there:

> There was a considerable blow to the ego in coming from, for instance, East Germany to London (…) for in England nothing one did mattered greatly while in East Germany virtually anything one did, no matter how small, how casual, could matter immensely. ("You can change someone's life by making a telephone call (…). You can save people. You can punish them") (202).

Marianne, however, fails to recognize the interdependence between the personal and the political (B. Daly 91). For her, Eastern Europe is but an exotic backdrop, a transitory phase in her numerous transatlantic travels, too marginal to be of any special significance, yet enticing in its otherness; a liminal realm of (controlled) danger and (romantic) possibility.

Accordingly, Budapest seen through the diplomat's eyes lacks Warsaw's multidimensionality. Although the representation of the Polish capital is also oriented toward the spectacular, as it emphasizes dissidence, political oppression, and Poland's dramatic history, it nonetheless seeks to capture the atmosphere of Warsaw in 1980, substantiating commonalities with informed observations. This is due to the fact that Judith seems to be authentically interested in Poland, and, despite her preconceptions,

determined to comprehend it, even if her journey of discovery is essentially limited to reconstructing her own identity. In this sense, Judith's interest is driven by deeply personal reasons; a motivation which Marianne lacks. Although her roots are also traced to Eastern Europe (her grandparents were of Lithuanian and Hungarian origins) her interest in the region is purely perfunctory. Despite being professionally involved with Eastern Europe, she is guided by clichés and common truths: "'Would he [Ottò] really be in such danger if the manuscript was discovered?' Marianne said doubtfully. 'This is Hungary, after all. Not Russia'" (212). The diplomat's failure to comprehend (and take seriously) political realities not only endangers Ottó's life, but also contributes to a reductionist representation of Eastern Europe. In this sense, the liminal dimension of Budapest as a transitory and thus constraint-free phase in Marianne's diplomatic travels reinforces the city's marginal status, casting it as an unreal half-romantic, half-tragic Old-World setting which, as the scene at the ambassador's residence demonstrates, is politically insignificant yet provides the characters with the possibility of enacting their personal fantasies of power and romance.

As part of the world behind the Iron Curtain, Marianne's Budapest is populated by tragic dissidents and other "lost causes;" a standard repertoire of the Cold-War rendition of the European East, but she has neither interest nor understanding of the way they live and work.[108] Once she sets off from Budapest, she forgets about Ottó and his life's work, which she has handled so carelessly.

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[108] Marianne's ignorance is exposed when one of her lovers, the deputy chief of mission, tells her that Ottó's name is in fact his surname, since the name and surname are reversed in written Hungarian (211).

4.5. Conclusions

In one of the interviews, Joyce Carol Oates described herself as "a thoroughly American writer in the tradition of the great psychological realists—Melville, Hawthorne, Henry James—who nonetheless delve into the mythic and emblematic" (Goodreads n. pag.). Although the stories discussed in this chapter are set outside the United States of America, they corroborate the above self-image by conveying representations which are at once thoroughly American and universal.

Communist Eastern Europe conjured by Oates is laden with the cultural baggage of post-war representations of the region. World War II and the Holocaust are perhaps the most important intertexts, but the literary image is also informed by the Cold-War politics: Soviet-American cultural race, "the ballet of détente," Eastern European struggle for freedom, and the problem of dissidence. Particularly "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" and "Détente" are built on the American cultural imagery associated with post-war international relations; West Berlin's symbolism in the American political imaginary, and a Janus-faced representation of the Soviet Russia, respectively.

Simultaneously, the European East portrayed in the stories has a distinctively allegorical air. Through the use of legend-like narrative, indefinite timeframe and ambiguous locations, Oates casts it as an imaginary liminal space kept apart from the outside world by a threshold that can be fairly easily crossed by the Westerners but remains impenetrable to the natives. Accordingly, people behind the Wall are forever locked in the Eastern prison, while the Americans are free to board the plane and head toward the West; as Judith and Marianne do at the end of their respective journeys. It is only in "Détente" that the East visits the West and not the other way round. However,

boundaries in the mind prove to be as confining as the physical ones, and the Soviets and Americans remain stuck in the narrative of difference.

The inevitability of boundaries is also the subject of "The Lamb of Abyssalia"[109] which recounts the story of a man who returns home traumatized by a journey to an imaginary Third-World country. As far-fetched as this story seems in the context of the other works, it also dramatizes barriers stemming from economic, social, and spiritual differences. At the same time, the story's very presence adds to the collection's universal, metaphorical quality. By setting the action in a fictitious country, Oates conveys an impression that it is not the actual place that matters, but rather what it stands for to the characters.

Even when the time and setting are clearly specified, like in the Warsaw story, the representation of the foreign other retains the quality of ambiguity and transitoriness. Consequently, communist realities of Eastern Europe, closely interlinked with the area's complex historical predicament, "are not all important as facts, or social or cultural truths, but as signs and symbols of an ancient heritage of human potential and failing" (Andrzejczak 311). The most emblematic example of the above is obviously the Berlin Wall, which is an allegory of the perennial struggle between life and death instincts.

Immersed in the liminal situation of travel, the Americans coming into contact with the Eastern other seem to forgo their usual Western selves. Therefore, a hitherto reasonable narrator of "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" develops an obsessive fixation with the Wall, following in the footsteps of his unbalanced brother; Judith Horne feels physically and emotionally distressed to the point of hysteria, while Marianne Beecher discovers that in the world behind the Iron Curtain, she has "a limitless capacity for romance."

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[109] The name "Abyssalia" echoes Abissynia—the former name of Ethiopia—but may also be read as a variation of the Latin adjective abyssālis, which means "pertaining or resembling an abyss."

More like a fantastical, fairy-tale dreamscape than an actual geographic area, Eastern Europe provides Oates's Americans with a liminal space of transition where their fears and obsessions are laid bare at last; something which would be inconceivable in their domestic environment. In fact, Eastern Europe at its most morbid and spectacular, with its deadly Berlin Wall, the unspeakable Holocaust, and the perils of dissidence, seems particularly pertinent to the central theme of Oates's fiction—the painful and violent microcosm of the self within the larger-than-life macrocosm of (American) history and society. Importantly, these East-West encounters always come to an end, as the place is hardly an aim in itself. Instead, it serves as a catalyst for the characters' personal conflicts and dramas.

To conclude, Eastern Europe portrayed by Oates is the realm which exists in the mind, rather than on the map. By including the story on Soviet-American relations and another one dealing with an unidentified Third-World country, the author depicts a space which does not correspond to the Cold-War map of the region, but which does reflect the political agendas of the period, while at the same echoing the author's inner geographies.

5. Philip Roth

The last of the dominant American voices on Eastern Europe explored in this dissertation belongs to Philip Roth. In accordance with the pattern established in the previous chapters, I discuss Roth's themes and interests against the backdrop of post-war America, focusing on those questions which have driven his fiction since his debut as a writer in 1959. Next, I introduce David Kepesh and Nathan Zuckerman—Roth's most famous alter egos, whom he sends to communist Prague in *The Professor of Desire* (1977), and *The Prague Orgy* (1985), respectively. Finally, I discuss both works in light of Roth's personal and professional engagement with the Other Europe.

Whenever the subject of the Nobel Prize in Literature is broached, Philip Roth's name invariably comes up (as does Joyce Carol Oates's). So far, however, the Swedish Academy has consistently overlooked the American author. When asked about this persistent "cold-shoulder" from the Nobel Committee, Roth replied with his customary irony: "I wonder if I had called "Portnoy's Complaint" "The Orgasm Under Rapacious Capitalism," if I would thereby have earned the favor of the Swedish Academy" (qtd. in Sandstorm n. pag.) In addition to making a point about the Academy's alleged preference for a certain type of literature, Roth's comment also seems to suggest that the kind of reputation that *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969) brought him has, at least for some, pigeonholed him as a writer whose work is not sufficiently universal to deserve a Nobel. While sex, often morally equivocal and aesthetically disturbing, is indeed a potent presence in Roth's fiction and a driving force for some of his characters, his works problematize questions and issues which are as universal and Nobel-worthy as they can get: life, death, art, identity. This is well visible in the author's critical biography written by the journalist and Roth's good friend, Claudia Roth Pierpont, who looks at Roth's

oeuvre in its totality, allowing the reader to appreciate Roth's mastery and his remarkable development as an artist, in addition to providing a glimpse of Roth's robust self, which is his favorite and most pliable material: "Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life *is* my life" (Roth, *Reading* 123).

While *Portnoy's Complaint* remains Roth's most emblematic work, given its polemic subject matter, outrageous humor, and the controversy it sparked, nowadays Roth is hardly perceived as the iconoclast that he became when the novel was first published. As Adam Kirsh observes in *The New Republic*, in the last two decades the American author "went from bete noire to laurate," gathering an impressive collection of major literary awards and honors, in addition to having his works published in the prestigious Library of America series (n. pag.). Already in 2003, Mark Shechner remarked that anyone interested in Roth should brace themselves to deal with a constantly expanding body of scholarship, while David Brauner observed in 2007 that "criticism on Roth has become something of a minor (or maybe not so minor industry)" (2). Nowadays, with the latest BBC documentary on the American author, a National Humanities Medal awarded by President Obama, and a Philip Roth bus tour around his hometown Newark, it is safe to say that Philip Roth's oeuvre is not only a gold mine for academics, but the writer himself has become something of an American landmark, especially since he announced his retirement in 2012. *Nemesis* (2010) is thus Roth's last work, rounding off an impressive bibliography of thirty-one works of fiction. It might not be his finest book, but it does deal with people and places which have been crucial to Roth as a writer and as a person: the Jewish community of Weequahic neighborhood in Newark, where Roth grew up and which he immortalized in his fiction.

One of the chapters in Roth Pierpont's critical biography starts with the following quotation from Roth: "The epithet 'American Jewish writer' has no meaning for me. If I'm not an American, I'm nothing" (206). While this oft-cited statement might make little sense for those readers whose immediate association with the name Roth is exactly the sobriquet that the author disavows, it does point to the "complicated blending of cultural identities that marks his works" (Parrish, "Roth" 127). Roth's writing is deeply-grounded in post-war America whose integral part is the Jewish-American experience that many of his works problematize. The verb "problematize" is crucial here, for Roth is a master at complicating his characters' lives by facing them with questions and dilemmas which force them to abandon the "comfort zone" of their stable, family- and socially-sanctioned selves, in search for often unattainable answers. One has to only think about Roth's debut work, *Goodbye Columbus and Five Short Stories* (1959) to see that being Jewish in America is fraught with ambivalence, as the protagonists negotiate their identity in relation to their Jewish past and tradition, on the one hand, and the socio-economic realities of the post-war U.S., on the other. Accordingly, Victoria Aarons observes that Roth's question in these early stories "is not simply 'what it means to be a Jew,' but rather, 'how Jewish is *too* Jewish?'" (13). It is the latter dilemma that drives the eponymous Alexander Portnoy over the edge, making him seek liberation from the stereotype of a "nice Jewish boy" and the code of behavior that comes with this category, and, in doing so, persistently break Jewish (and Gentile) taboos.

Roth first came under criticism from the Jewish community after the publication of *Goodbye Columbus* which divided critics and audience alike. While many appreciated his "strong voice and a fresh perspective,"[110] others accused him of casting

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[110] Most notably, one of Roth's favorite writers: Saul Bellow (Roth Pierpont 12).

Jews in a negative light and thus perpetuating potentially detrimental national clichés; a view verbalized in one hard-hitting question, which any scholar of Roth probably knows by heart: "Mr. Roth, would you write the same stories you've written if you were living in Nazi Germany? (Roth Pierpont 13-14). Roth replied to accusations of anti-Semitism and self-hatred in an essay titled "Writing about Jews" (1963), where he also addressed one of the central themes of this dissertation: the problem of ethnic clichés. Quoting from several letters deploring his equivocal portrayal of Jews, Roth asserts his right to treat Jews on par with anyone else, refusing to renounce his flawed characters for the sake of creating a "'balanced portrayal of Jews as we know them,'" as one indignant New York rabbi put it (*Reading* 198). In a slightly earlier essay, "Some New Jewish Stereotypes" (1961), Roth warns against "swapping one simplification for another" as he voices his objections against those Jewish-American authors who glorify their characters for being Jewish (*Reading* 185). Roth's fictional rejoinder to these conflicting views was of course *Portnoy's Complaint*, which at once exploited and challenged national stereotypes about Jews and their uneasy relationship with the Goyim.[111]

More than five decades since Roth's literary debut "[t]he task of the Roth critic should no longer be to defend the embattled author but rather to recognize and examine the ambiguities, ambivalences and paradoxes that make Roth's fiction demand and amply repay repeated readings" (Brauner 7). In my view, it is particularly the problem of identity that merits such meticulous attention. In relation to gender, Debra Shostak

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[111] However, Jews were not the only ones offended by Roth's book. As Debra Shostak remarks in "Roth and Gender:" "[Roth's] attention to the insatiable, transgressive, and often stultified appetites of men has laid him open to charges of misogyny, especially in his early work" (112). Particularly, his 1974 novel *My Life as a Man* met with vehement critique from those feminist scholars who took Peter Tarnopol's portrayal of his wife Maureen; a vile, scheming, and unbalanced heroine, to be more than a literary creation. Roth's earlier female characters, such as Brenda Patimkin from *Goodbye Columbus*, not to mention an array of shiksas and the castrating Jewish Mother from *Portnoy's Complaint* did not help either. Roth's famously dismissed these charges in an interview with Hermione Lee, where he used the same argument as the one he employed to counter his Jewish critics: there is no one correct way to represent women or anybody else for that matter.

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convincingly demonstrates that the conflict between "a nice Jewish boy" and "a Jewboy," which lies at the core of *Portnoy's Complaint*, reveals the protagonist's struggle to reconcile ethnicity understood in terms of "typically" Jewish qualities, such as bookishness, meekness, and chastity, with American "myth of masculinity," expressed through "sexual prowess and economic gain" (113). While for Alexander Portnoy this conflict remains irresolvable, Roth's work persistently pursues the question of identity, bound up by ethnic and social constraints, and the possibility of self-invention. In exploring these issues, Roth often reaches for masks and the liberty they confer, and the proliferation of alter egos and doppelgangers in his fiction attests to the plethora of potential scenarios which life has in store for his characters. Thus, in Roth's 1986 novel, *The Counterlife*, Henry Zuckerman's destiny depends on the outcome of heart surgery, and the author not only plays with the consequences of the procedure, but also has the protagonist exchange places on the surgical table with his brother Nathan. The result is a rich and intricate work, both formally and plot-wise, in which "[t]he succession and interplay of counterlives frustrates any attempt to identify any one of them as more authoritative than the others" (Cohen 87). In *The Counterlife* ethnic identity is not stable but depends upon the place and the circumstances in which it is enacted. Therefore, having survived heart surgery Henry Zuckerman reevaluates his American existence and moves to Israel to live a life of a Jewish settler. However, this new identity is hardly definitive, for, as Timothy Parrish is quick to point out, even if Roth's Jewish American characters "are born into an inescapable history,"[112] their

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[112] History might be inescapable, but it does not mean that it cannot be questioned. *Operation Shylock* (1993) revolves around the Israel trial of John Demjanjuk, a man accused of being a savagely brutal guard at the Treblinka Concentration Camp. While Demjanjuk's true identity is being debated by the Court (it is not clear whether he was or not the Camp's "Ivan the Great"), Roth ups the stakes in this game of masks and impersonators by confronting the novel's protagonist, the fictional American writer Philip Roth with his doppelganger. The other Philip Roth is an impostor who steals the protagonist's identity to propagate his own revisionist solution to the Israeli problem, the so-called Diasporism—an *en masse* return of Israeli Jews to their countries of origin in East-Central Europe (he even discusses this arrangement with the Solidarity leader Lech Wałęsa). As dizzying as the above plotline is, Roth

understanding of it is not, and they keep redefining themselves and their lives in relation to it ("Roth" 134).

While Roth's Jewish identity is inextricably linked to being American, and most of his characters share his hyphenated perspective, he has always been profoundly aware of how different his life would be, had he been born in Europe rather than in the U.S. It is this irreconcilable dichotomy of wartime experience on each continent that lies behind *The Ghost Writer* (1979), where Roth reverses the course of history by making Anne Frank survive death camps and come to America as Amy Bellette. Although it turns out that the story was only a product of Nathan Zuckerman's imagination, *The Ghost Writer* poses questions which are hard to dismiss: would the *Diary* be read in the same way had Anne survived?; would it have the same impact if Anne's family had been more *stereotypically* Jewish?; did Anne's message come through? (Roth Pierpont 116-18).

Anne Frank is not the only Jewish icon that Roth brought back to life in his fiction. Roth's fascination with Franz Kafka's life and oeuvre materialized in a short story entitled "'I Always Wanted You to Admire My Fasting;' or, Looking at Kafka" (1973).[113] Like *The Ghost Writer*, the story explores an imaginary "what if" scenario in which Franz Kafka had fled both tuberculosis and Hitler and is now living, of all places, in Jewish Newark. Although the first part of the story ends with an inevitable, encyclopedic pronouncement on Kafka's death, it only takes the reader one sentence to realize that the course of events had been reversed: "1942. I am nine; my Hebrew-school teacher, Dr. Kafka, is fifty-nine" (291). This unexpected twist is marked by a

complicates it even further by introducing a number of conflicting voices coming from both sides of the barricade. Therefore, we get to hear both Israelis and Palestinians; militants, intellectuals, writers, and spies, victims and perpetrators alike. Yet within this polyphony of voices, which at times turns into a cacophony of perspectives and beliefs, "no one point of view, however passionately held, and historically justifiable, trumps any other point of view" (Parrish 134), for the novel's goal is to "speak for them all" (Roth Pierpont 183).

[113] The story is included in Roth's *Reading Myself and Others* (1975), and all the quotations come from this collection.

change of perspective: it is a nine-year-old Philip Roth that tells us about his Hebrew teacher, a melancholy man with sour breath, which has earned him an ungraceful nickname of "Dr. Kishka" (291). In the story, Dr. Kafka dates little Philip's Aunt Rhoda, but the relationship does not work out due to some unnamed difficulties which, as Philip's older brother knowingly declares, must have to do with sex. Many years later, Philip, now a grown-up and an aspiring writer, receives a letter from his mother with Kafka's obituary attached: "(…) Dr. Kafka was born in Prague, Czechoslovakia, and was a refugee from Nazis. He leaves no survivors" (301). Nor does he leave any books: "no *Trial*, no *Castle*, no *Diaries*. The dead man's papers are claimed by no one, and disappear" (302). By conjuring an alternative life story for Kafka, Roth makes the man survive yet "murders" the writer, for, as the story's Kafkaesque finale has it, "[d]estiny being destiny, how could it be otherwise?" (302).

Brilliantly funny and touching at once, this first-person account may not carry the same emotional import as *The Ghost Writer*, but it does pose a similarly nagging if ultimately unanswerable question: what if Kafka had not died at the age of forty-one? Not only does Roth's fiction open up possibilities for testing such a hypothesis, but it also points to the singularity of Jewish life in America which, as these works show, may be juxtaposed with but not measured against the European experience, as Roth's early critics would have it.[114]

In an interview with Alain Finkielkraut from *Le Nouvel Observateur*, Roth speaks about his relationship to America in rather absolutist terms:

America allows me the greatest possible freedom to practice my vocation. America has the only literary audience that I can ever imagine taking any

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[114] It is notable that Roth's largest, and most successful, experiment in rewriting the past, *The Plot Against of America* (2004), takes place not in Europe, but in his familiar childhood setting: the U.S. of the 1930s, where the presidential elections had been won not by Franklin Delano Roosevelt, but a Nazi sympathizer Charles Lindbergh—an extravagant but not unlikely scenario that only Roth could pull off so masterfully.

sustained pleasure in my fiction. (…) My consciousness and my language were shaped by America. I am an American writer in ways that a plumber isn't an American plumber, or a miner an American miner or a cardiologist an American cardiologist. Rather, what the heart is to the cardiologist, the coal to the miner, the kitchen sink to the plumber, America is to me (*Reading* 110).

It would come as no surprise had these words been pronounced by John Updike. Yet while Updike's America assumes shape through confrontation with otherness, whether racial or political, for Roth America *is* difference: "I grew up feeling a part of majority composed of the competing minorities, no one of which impressed me as being in a more enviable social or cultural position than our own," observes the author in the same interview (107). That said, Roth's protagonists, particularly in his later fiction, relentlessly negotiate their individual experience of ethnicity against social realities, historical forces and national myths of the twentieth-century U.S. Nowhere is it more visible than in Roth's American Trilogy novels; *The American Pastoral* (1997), *I Married a Communist* (1998), and *The Human Stain* (2000), where the national archetype of self-determination is at once elevated and smashed to pieces. In David Brauner's words:

In all three cases, their [the protagonists'] attempts to recreate themselves are represented ambivalently: on the one hand as heroic feats of liberation, epitomizing the quintessentially American ideal of the self-made man and the immigrant dream of successful assimilation; on the other hand as futile fantasies of escape, illustrating the limitations of American social mobility and the impossibility of transcending historical circumstances (151).

The American Trilogy novels have been hailed by readers and critics alike for being Roth's most "universally" American novels, since they engage with milestones of

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American History: the Vietnam War, McCarthyism, and the Clinton-Lewinsky Scandal, respectively, or, to put it differently, the protagonists' fortunes become entangled in the spokes of the wheel of history, both collective and individual, and none emerges unscathed. In Brauner's reading, the characters fall victim to different forms of American Puritanism or "the pastoral dream of a Utopian world," unencumbered by the "impurity" of difference; political, racial or sexual. Inasmuch as they are victims of history, they also come undone by their own visions of purity/impurity, which lead them to eradicate those elements of their personal histories which they perceive as polluting (150). The result is a personal and professional mess, for as Faunia Farley puts it in *The Human Stain*, "the fantasy of purity" only leads to "*more* impurity" (242).

As much as Roth's interests have been bound up with his homeland, his fiction has frequently reached beyond the Atlantic in search for inspiration, comparison, and dialog. The alternative versions of Anne Frank's and Franz Kafka's biographies are not the only instances of Roth's creative "ghostwriting," "in which the writer acknowledges literary predecessors' influence by engaging in competitive interplay with them" (Basu 48). As Derek Parker Royal observed in "Roth, Literary Influence, and Postmodernism" interpreting Roth's fiction from the traditional standpoint of a literary influence will not suffice (23-24). Instead, he proposes to read it through the lens of intertextuality and metafiction, as a means of exposing and appreciating an intricate web of voices which speak to each another (as in Zuckerman books) but also reach out beyond their self-contained universe to engage in productive dialogs with other authors, discourses and places. The Bakhtinian nature of Roth's works is reflected in the latest comparative collection of essays edited by Velichka Ivanova: *Roth and World Literature: Transatlantic Perspectives and Uneasy Passages* (2014), which is organized around the metaphor of the transatlantic; "a space of intersections and continuous back-and-forth

crossing" (13). In adopting this liminal perspective, the contributors move beyond the practice of "influence-spotting" within Roth's highly intertextual works, to situate them in the "extended literary space" of world literature, with the aim of "rethink[ing] established definitions of Roth's literary identity as homogeneous and stable" (14). It is noteworthy that one of four sections in the collection has been dedicated entirely to Roth's transatlantic connection with East-Central Europe—a rich and significant chapter in the author's artistic trajectory, which is also the central concern of this chapter.

Unlike John Updike and Joyce Carol Oates, Roth's engagement with the region was not framed by the context of American cultural diplomacy, yet, as I hope to demonstrate, the cultural exchange he established with Czech writers goes beyond the other authors' official performance. Roth undertook his "great European tour" privately in the spring of 1972, accompanied by his current girlfriend, Barbara Sproul. The itinerary included Venice, Vienna, and Prague, but it is the last capital that captivated the American author for several years to come. Although Roth is one of those people whom Stephen Fischer-Galati identified as the most likely travelers to Eastern Europe given their genealogical ties with the region,[115] the American author had a different reason for visiting Prague. In a 1976 piece written for *The New York Times*, Roth explained that this first journey to the Czech capital was motivated by a desire to see the city of Kafka:

> It is Franz Kafka who was responsible for getting me to Prague to begin with. I began reading Kafka seriously in my early thirties at a time when I was enormously dismayed to find myself drifting away, rather than towards, what I had taken to be my goals as a writer and a man—at a time, in other words, when

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[115] Roth's maternal grandparents came to the United States of America from Kiev. His father's parents came to the U.S. from Galicia.

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I was unusually sensitized to Kafka's tales of spiritual disorientation and

obstructed energies ("In Search" n. pag.).

The above passage testifies to the impact that the Czech author exerted on Roth, both

professionally and personally. It also explains why on coming to Prague Roth undertook

a diligent "literary pilgrimage," searching for places associated with Kafka and his

family. The short story on Kafka, which I have briefly discussed earlier in this section,

was completed following Roth's first stay in Prague (Roth Pierpont 88), but the trip

proved to be productive also in other, unexpected ways. As Roth recalls in Roth

Pierpont's biography, "I wanted to see Kafka's city, and accidentally I found something

more important" (86). Through his Czech editor, Roth came in touch with unofficial

Czech authors, embarking on a liminal journey of discovery permeated with the

disquieting spirit of Kafka. Before I move on to discussing its literary outcomes, *The*

Professor of Desire (1977) and *The Prague Orgy* (1985), I wish to devote some

attention to David Kepesh and Nathan Zuckerman; the characters whom Roth

dispatched to Eastern Europe in both works. In contradistinction to John Updike, Roth

relied on the existent characters to reflect his impressions of Prague. Consequently, each

of his protagonists comes to Czechoslovakia equipped with a biographical build-up and

a heavy baggage of emotional agenda, which inevitably tint their perceptions of the

Czech other. This is especially true in the case of Zuckerman whose literary existence as

a protagonist prior to *The Prague Orgy* spans three works:[116] *The Ghost Writer* (1979),

Zuckerman Unbound (1981), and *The Anatomy Lesson* (1983). As for Kepesh, there is

only one, albeit conspicuous, antecedent to *The Professor of Desire*, a surreal

extravaganza of a novella called *The Breast* (1972). That said, before Kepesh arrives in

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[116] Roth first introduced the character of Nathan Zuckerman in *My Life as a Man* (1974).

Prague Roth provides us with a solid perspective on the professor's desires and preoccupations; complete with an insight into his youthful excesses.

5.1. Kepesh and Zuckerman: Roth's Ambassadors in Prague

In Kafka's *Metamorphosis* (1915), a traveling salesman Gregor Samsa wakes up one morning only to find out that he has been transformed into a giant insect. Similar predicament befalls the Jewish-American literature professor, David Kepesh, who, however, metamorphoses into a massive mammary gland in Roth's *The Breast*. This very first encounter with Kepesh already intimates the character's wobbly self (no pun intended). Although Kepesh is still a breast at the end of the novella, albeit with its own master plan for using his bizarre condition to earn a fortune as a celebrity, he returns in a human form in *The Professor* of Desire, which tells the story of his life before the "accident." The part which is of most interest to me is obviously Kepesh's visit to Prague—the city of Kafka—which, in hindsight, may also account for the Kafkaesque twist to *The Breast*.[117]

As volatile a character as he is, there are two constants in Kepesh's life: literature and sex, or, to borrow Mark Shechner's words "the dynamic Roth dualism: a thick personal culture and the psychology of unobstructed need, the standard paleface-redskin package" (198).[118] David Kepesh's infatuation with European literature and women goes back to his college days, when his Byron-inspired motto had been "Studious by day, dissolute by night" (*The Professor* 17). A student of comparative

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[117] To complicate things even further, Kepesh reappears as the narrator of *The Dying Animal* (2001) where, as several critics pointed out, he does not seem to recall his metamorphosis, even though it is breasts (belonging to his young and voluptuous student Consuela) that he is fixated on in the novel.

[118] In fact, these two passions might have had a bearing on his transmogrification into a breast. As Kepesh debates his condition with his psychoanalyst, Dr. Kilinger, he comes to the conclusion that it must have been "[t]eaching Gogol and Kafka every year—teaching 'The Nose' and 'Metamorphosis'" that somehow "inspired" his grotesque state which not only rendered him incapable of living his former life, but also turned him into a sex maniac (*The Breast* 55).

literature and a "sexual prodigy" by his own admission, Kepesh undertakes his first transatlantic journey, traveling to England on a Fulbright scholarship. Once in Europe he lives mostly by the second part of the Byronian dictum, engaging in sexual adventures with prostitutes and fellow students alike—most notably Brigitta, a daring and sexually adventurous Swede. At one point, however, the studious side of the protagonist takes over and he comes back to the States to pursue his neglected education, only to find himself embroiled in another messy relationship, which this time, however, leaves him depressed and sexually powerless. Unsurprisingly by now, the cure from Kepesh's predicament assumes the form of another shapely female (already known to the reader from *The Breast* as Kepesh's sole consolation in distress), Claire Ovington. It is with Claire that Kepesh journeys back to Europe to visit, just as Philip Roth did, Venice, Vienna, and Prague.

Kepesh's interest in Prague mirrors Roth's. He too is an avid reader of Franz Kafka, and, like Roth, has taught the Czech author to American students. Most importantly, Kafka's tales of "obstructed energies" resonate with Kepesh's emotional malaise which goes back to his relationship with Claire's predecessor, his ex-wife Helen. Although he has recovered peace of mind and his rampant libido at Claire's side, on returning to Europe he is haunted by memories of Brigitta, his "lewd, lost soul mate" (162). Thus, when Kepesh and Claire reach Prague, his newly-acquired monogamous and restrained self is on the verge of collapse.

"If Nathan Zuckerman is Roth's alter-ego as a storyteller, Kepesh is the alter-id" (Shechner 198). Indeed, while Kepesh seems to embody the instinctual drives in Roth's fiction, *Zuckerman Bound* (1985) [119] offers a "full-scale portrait of the artist" at different stages of development (Kartinger 35). David Brauner concurs with this appraisal in his

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[119] The title refers to Zuckerman books: *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, *The Anatomy Lesson*, and *The Prague Orgy* published together as *Zuckerman Bound: A Trilogy and Epilogue* in 1985.

discussion of the tetralogy, pointing out that all Zuckerman books share the "trope of the Jewish writer on trial both as a writer and as a Jew" (43). Focusing on the legalistic elements in the series, both in terms of content and stylistics, Brauner convincingly demonstrates that from the very beginning of the saga Zuckerman is persistently placed on trial by his fellow Jews who find fault with the way he approaches ethnicity in his fiction. At the same time, *Zuckerman Bound* is also concerned with the process of becoming and then being a writer, and the various trials and ordeals this involves. Thus, in *The Ghost Writer* young Zuckerman is struggling to remain faithful to his own voice, even though this entails forsaking his family ties, while simultaneously searching for the right mode of living for the kind of writer that he wishes to be. Although the choice between loyalty to one's community and artistic freedom is resolved in favor of the latter, Zuckerman is faced with the consequences of his decision in *Zuckerman Unbound*, where he suffers from an unwanted notoriety following the publication of *Carnovsky*; a work whose reputation resembles that of Roth's own contentious bestseller, *Portnoy's Complaint* (Brauner 27). More importantly, he also has to live with the knowledge that *Carnovsky* has been the final nail to his father's coffin. If, following Brauner's trial metaphor, Zuckerman's charge in the above novel is predominantly psychological, as he suffers from notoriety and guilt, then in *The Anatomy Lesson* he is made to repent with his own flesh and bone. As Roth Pierpont points out, the novel's predominant theme is pain: "Pain and writing. Pain and not writing. Real physical pain that has taken over your life and that has no explanation and apparent remedy," but also "pain of having written a book that killed your father and made your innocent mother's life a hell" (128). Zuckerman's way of appeasing the pain, in all its configurations, is to re-invent himself as a medical doctor; an obstetrician who delivers babies to the happiness of the world, instead of novels to the contempt of Jewish critics and relatives

alike. The solution will not do, for in *The Prague Orgy* Zuckerman returns as a novelist, albeit with a serious mission of his own. While Kepesh's purpose is to see the city of Kafka, Nathan Zuckerman travels to Czechoslovakia to recover the manuscripts of an unpublished Jewish author perished in the Holocaust, the father of a banned Czech writer, Zdenek Sisovsky. Therefore, Zuckerman's ultimate trial is to venture behind the Iron Curtain in order to, at last, do something for the community that he has persistently defied through his works. It is this noble, and as it turns out pretty strenuous task, that forms the axis of Zuckerman's exploits in Eastern Europe in *The Prague Orgy*. Into the bargain, he gets to know a literary universe which, despite being an ocean away from his own, resonates with his sensibilities as an author. Although the novella was published as an epilogue to *Zuckerman Bound*, Roth asserts that the story about an American novelist traveling to Prague was in fact a seed from which the whole series sprang up. Having realized that he compressed too much material into the story, Roth decided to extend the material over several books (Roth Pierpont 109). This is clearly yet another evidence of Prague's productive influence on Philip Roth in the 1970s and beyond.

As explained in the chapter on imagology, analyzing literature from the perspective of national images must take into account a series of parameters that a given text displays, and the bearing they have on the representation in question. By offering a brief characterization of David Kepesh and Nathan Zuckerman I have wished to elucidate their significance within Roth's oeuvre, as well as indicate the uses that he has put them to in his fiction. In this sense, each man embodies certain idiosyncrasies pertinent not only to his singular character, but also the profession he represents and the ethnicity that is his. Accordingly, sexuality and Kafka are the leading tropes in *The Professor of Desire*, while *The Prague Orgy* revolves around the questions which also

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lie at the heart of Henry Bech's Eastern European stories: what it means to be a writer, and what is the relationship between the political system in which one writes and the nature and quality of the literature produced. In other words, when analyzing Roth's portrayal of Eastern Europe from an imagological point of view, it is necessary to bear in mind the preoccupations and desires that drive his protagonists, and, as this chapter hopes to show, the author himself.

Since both works are concerned with Prague in the years following the pacification of the Prague Spring reform movement, I have decided not to discuss them separately, but rather offer a joint reading aimed at stressing parallels in the representation of the Czech capital, while at the same time bearing in mind individual agendas of both protagonists. Importantly, my discussion of these works is also informed by Roth's personal engagement with Eastern Europe, which I consider to be the most far-reaching and meaningful of the three authors examined in this dissertation. Accordingly, I propose to view Eastern Europe and Prague in particular in terms of transnational liminal space endowed with formative and generative potential, not just in Roth's fiction but also in his life as a writer and a (reluctant) public figure.

5.2. Roth, Kepesh, and Zuckerman in the Other Europe[120]

"Finding out who he was, getting outside himself, understanding what was meaningful to him and doing something about it, in his life, and his work: these were the somewhat blurry aims that came into focus as soon as he arrived in Prague"—this is how Roth Pierpont begins her discussion of the "Czechoslovak phase" in Philip Roth's life (86). The critic asserts the city's importance in Roth's life and work by casting it as

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[120] An earlier version of this section was published as "Understanding the Other Europe: Philip Roth's Writings on Prague" in the 17th issue of *Revista de Estudios Norteamericanos*.

a catalyst for changes, or at least rethinking his "goals as a writer and a man." In line with the critical framework of this dissertation, Prague is thus seen as a liminal space and time of reflection within a transatlantic rite of passage, whose completion promises creative renewal and serves as a gateway to another, more mature phase. If, as Victor Turner said, liminal transitions imply leaving the safe and the familiar behind, then traveling to Prague in the 1970s must have indeed seemed like entering a world apart. Roth's visit to Prague coincided with the period of hardline communist rule, rather ironically termed *normalization*. Though Roth came to Prague looking for Kafka, what he found was, to cite Kundera, "Kafka forbidden in a country whose culture had been massacred by the Russian occupation" ("Some" 160). The city appeared submerged in a deep apathy; cultural life, which had been the motor of the Prague Spring reform movement,[121] was now virtually non-existent. Power was returned to the communist old guard and reforms were annulled. Censorship was reinstalled, and the authorities made every effort to nip any liberal-minded initiatives in the bud. Literary journals had been closed; intellectuals lost their jobs and were forced to do unqualified work, while writers were forbidden to publish and many chose to leave the country. Among them was Milan Kundera who in 1975 moved to France. Yet, as Roth said, he instantly felt that "there was something here for me" (qtd. in Roth Pierpont 86).

Extending the liminal metaphor a little further, those undergoing the liminal phase are often accompanied by "masters of ceremonies" or "guardians," acting as

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[121] The term refers to the unprecedented liberalization of social, political and cultural life in Czechoslovakia. Since the 1960s the Czechoslovak Union of Writers pushed for greater freedom and relaxation of censorship "helping to generate a tremendous expansion of cultural life, the likes of which had not been seen since the late 19th century" (Falk 66). New self-reflexive literature emerged, there was an increase in independent theatrical productions (among them Havel's famous "theater of the absurd") as well as development of innovative musical currents and Czech "new wave" cinema. The process reached its climax in 1967 at the Fourth Congress of the Czechoslovak Union of Writers, where such writers like Havel, Kundera and Klíma openly voiced criticism of the political system and its detrimental social and cultural policy. Historians agree that the writers' opposition inspired the reform movement, and gave it moral justification (Beneš 106, Falk 67). The Prague Spring was brought to an abrupt end on August 20, 1968 when Warsaw Pact tanks entered Czechoslovakia and within thirty-six hours occupied the whole country.

guides or instructors during this ambiguous and uncertain time. Importantly, during his stay in Prague Roth counted on the help and inside knowledge of Czech author Ivan Klíma, who became his "principal reality instructor" (Roth, Shop 44). Klíma would take him to street kiosks, public buildings, and construction sites where Czech writers were doing menial jobs. They had been dismissed from their posts, and their works, as was the case with Klíma's, had been banned as a consequence of their involvement in the Prague Spring. In fact, Klíma's novel, *Love and Garbage* (1986) tells the story of one such proscribed writer-turned-street sweeper. The book reflects the author's experience of being blacklisted and banned from working except in low-status jobs. The protagonist has been socially degraded and his connections with the outside world have been severed: his phone has been disconnected and his passport removed. He is surrounded by people who speak in *Jerkish*, the language invented to communicate with chimpanzees, which in the novel stands for the distorted, packed-with-lies communist propaganda, daily fed to the mass media. In a world filled with Jerkish, relief can be found only in literature. The narrator of Klíma's work looks for it in Kafka's fiction, and the novel is interspersed with his reflections on Kafka's life and writing. Also Soska, a degraded university teacher and David Kepesh's "reality instructor" from *The Professor of Desire*, finds solace in books. Soska offers to give Kepesh and Claire a tour of the Old Town, but the only thing that Kepesh seems to be interested in is Kafka's Prague; the city where the great author lived, worked, and suffered. Prague is thus haunted by Kafka's ghost, and its topography still bears the writer's footprints:

> From a bench in the Old Town Square we gaze across at the palatial building
> where Franz Kafka attended Gymnasium. To the right of the columned entryway
> is the ground-floor site of Hermann Kafka's business (…). In the imposing

Gothic church nearby, high on the wall of the nave, a small square window faces

an apartment where (…) Kafka's family had once lived" (167).

Not only is Prague mapped as the city of Kafka, but also Kepesh's conversation with

Soska revolves around the figure of the Czech writer, whose significance for both

professors extends beyond the literary. As it turns out, following the pacification of the

Prague Spring Soska had been dismissed from his university and forced to "retire" at

the age of thirty-nine. He then became involved in Czech counterculture, only to find

himself seriously ill—a dire consequence of the stress and pressure of living a double

life of dissidence. When Kepesh, baffled by the Czech's equanimity in the face of his

predicament, asks Soska what gets him through each day, his matter-of-fact reply is

"Kafka, of course" (169). But by that he does not mean only reading Kafka's works,

but rather the entire universe created by the Czech writer; the absurd, bureaucracy-

ridden world where one is bound to lose against a larger-than-life enemy, be it the

court, the castle, or the communist system. In *The Professor of Desire*, the nightmarish

world devised by Kafka becomes a metaphor for communist reality and a handy

shortcut to talk about it. "Many of us survive almost solely on Kafka," confides Soska

to his American peer, "including people in the street who have never read a word of

his. They look at one another when something happens, and they say, 'It's Kafka.'

Meaning, 'That's the way it goes here now'" (169). Soska and Kepesh are scholars of

Kafka, and as Milan Kundera observed, to both professors Kafka speaks of impotence,

that is inability to exert control. For Kepesh it is sexual powerlessness, whereas for

Soska political impotence, yet "[t]hese two interpretations do not contradict each

other, they are complementary, marking two opposing faces of man's essential

impotence" (Kundera, "Some" 160-61). Therefore, Kafka and his oeuvre provide a

nexus between two seemingly opposite worlds. "To each obstructed citizen, his own

Kafka" says Soska to Kepesh (173) pointing to the universal nature of Kafka's works and literature in general—the reasons which brought Roth to Prague in the first place. In this sense, communist Prague functions as a "contact zone" for the productive encounter between American and Czech perspectives which, though framed by different concerns, recognize literature's unique potential to illuminate human experience.

Yet by drawing a comparison between these two professors and their respective readings of Kafka, Roth foregrounds also a dramatic discrepancy between being an intellectual in a democratic society and under communism. While Soska is constantly under surveillance from the secret police, Kepesh feels "safe and inviolable, (…) with the passport in my jacket and the young woman at my side" (174). Therefore, by traveling to Prague Kepesh is made to realize what his life would be like if he were a literature professor in Czechoslovakia rather than in the United States of America.

Although the novel does not explore this discrepancy much further, the "what if?" question lies at the heart of Roth's engagement with Eastern Europe: "The purpose of my first visit to Prague had been to see where Franz Kafka had lived. I returned to Prague because I wanted to find out how the writers managed to live there working in conditions that were alien to my own writing experience" ("In Search" n. pag.). During his subsequent visits, Roth not only made friends with the proscribed authors, most importantly Klíma and Kundera, but also received a "thoroughgoing education" about cultural life under communism (Italie n. pag.), and was introduced to a parallel world of culture, in which independent writing flourished against political odds.[122]

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[122] In one of his essays, Timothy Garton Ash compared it to a lake permanently covered with a thick layer of ice, where apparently nothing moves but actually much goes on under the surface (57). Under the ice-cold façade of harsh restrictions, Kafkaesque bureaucracy and political impotence, samizdat publishing was thriving. Unable to publish officially, dissident authors channelled their efforts

On seeing how his Czech counterparts lived, Roth devised a plan for supporting them financially, which he carried out with the help of other American authors, including John Updike, but without the knowledge of the State Department.[123] The exchange was reciprocal. If Roth helped Czech authors financially, they in turn inspired him to (re)consider the condition of being a writer and the meaning of literature. As Victor Turner observed, those passing through a liminal time and place are made to reflect upon their society and the powers that generate and sustain it. In this sense, the experience of venturing behind the Iron Curtain and meeting the proscribed authors broadened and enriched Roth's perspective, consolidating his views on what it means to be an author in America and elsewhere. Furthermore, coming into contact with Czech culture,[124] served as an entryway to discovering literature from "the Other Europe." This in turn materialized in Roth's project of cultural mediation—introducing the American audience to the works of some of the best authors of the region. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, Roth became the chief editor of the Penguin series called "Writers from the Other Europe," published between 1974 and 1987, containing nineteen books by the leading writers of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Yugoslavia, etc. This singular contribution earned him a comparison to Max Brod, Franz Kafka's friend and biographer responsible for making his literary oeuvre known posthumously to the general public (Koy 180).[125]Artistically, the visits brought about a new direction in Roth's writing; "a Europeanization of outlook and a

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into creating the so-called second culture, independent of the system and the rigid doctrine of social realism.

[123]At Jerzy Kosinski's prompting, who was then the president of PEN, Roth let PEN take charge of the transfers. However, the project soon came to an end, when it was decided that PEN was interfering with the State Department's politics by supporting the Czechs (Roth Pierpont 98).

[124] On coming back home from his first trip to Prague, Roth took a vivid interest in Czech literature and language, attending a seminar in Czech culture and frequenting Czech places in New York (Roth Pierpont 88).

[125] In 2013, Roth received the PEN/Allen Foundation Literary Service Award in recognition not only of his works but also of his advocacy for writers from Czechoslovakia and other countries of the Eastern Bloc.

deepening of his fascination with the intractable, the perverse, and the unattainable" (Shechner 97). It is my contention that *The Prague Orgy* embodies these qualities to perfection.

While Kepesh learns about the condition of Czech intelligentsia from professor Soska, who is virtually trapped behind the Iron Curtain not just by the authorities but also his own physical predicament, in *The Prague Orgy* Zuckerman is visited by a man who has chosen to sever ties with his homeland. Czech author Zdenek Sisovsky is a prototypical émigré writer who, having been forbidden to publish, escaped the regime by abandoning his country and settling in the West. Yet unlike such prominent émigrés as Milan Kundera and Josef Škvorecký, Sisovsky is unable to write away from his homeland. Although in the West he is free to be a writer, he is also deprived of "all the other things that gave meaning to life" (10) and fueled his writing back home. Instead, he assumes the role of a representative of the tragic Czechoslovak nation. Sisovsky's dramatic narrative is further reinforced by the presence of his companion, Eva Kalinova, "Prague's great Chekhovian actress," degraded for political and ethnic reasons (her previous Czech lover was Jewish too) and forced to perform a menial job instead (10). Even though Sisovsky makes a pretense of downgrading his own work by overstressing the controversy which Zuckerman's *Carnovsky* sparked in the States, the alleged affinity between both writers only serves to foreground the Czechs' personal drama. In other words, Sisovsky and Kalinova embody the stereotype of repressed Eastern European intellectuals whose lives have been shattered by the communist regime. However, while Sisovsky feeds Western spectacular hetero-image of Czechoslovakia with his stories of communist oppression suffered by Eva, the actress refuses to be defined solely by her background: "Zdenek, why do you persecute me? I do not care to be an ironical Czech character in an ironical Czech story. Everything that happens in

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Czechoslovakia, they shrug their shoulders and say, 'Pure Schweik, pure Kafka.' I am sick of them both," she declares (12). In doing so, not only does she expose Sisovsky's urge to sensationalize her life for the sake of Westerners like Zuckerman, but also points to certain persistent auto- and hetero-stereotypes of Czechoslovakia under communism. If the figure of a repressed émigré author embodies the system's oppressive politics in the eyes of the West, then the two emblematic figures of Czech literature, Jaroslav Hašek's good soldier Švejk and Franz Kafka, function as internal symbols of a suffocating, absurd-ridden existence under communism for the Czechs. It is noteworthy that Eva regards both narratives as equally reductionist. On the one hand, she is critical of the political passivity of her own nation; "[w]e read too much, we fantasize too much," while on the other, she feels ashamed of not being a dissident herself: [a]ll these people, they suffer for their ideas and for their banned books, and for democracy to return to Czechoslovakia—they suffer for their principles, for their humanity, for their hatred of the Russians, and in this terrible story I am still suffering for love!" (11,13). Unlike Sisovsky, whose "doubt" seems more like a spectacular strategy aimed at grabbing Zuckerman's attention than a true moral dilemma, Kalinova is a deeply ambivalent character torn between the longing for Czechoslovakia and a deep conviction that there is no life for her there. In spite of having emigrated, she remains enslaved by her Czech identity and thus unable to make a new start abroad, unburdened by Prague and its "ironical" and dramatic stories that Sisovsky keeps perpetuating. To put it differently, she remains suspended between two worlds and lifestyles; between the memories of her life as a celebrated Chekhovian actress in Czechoslovakia and her present status as an emigrant "nobody," deprived of her roots and "all the other things that gave meaning to life." Moreover, she is unable to take advantage of the situation by commodifying her immigrant story in the manner of Sisovsky. In portraying Eva's

painful condition Roth refuses to contribute to the essentialist representation of the Eastern European predicament, foregrounding instead the individual dimension of emigration—Eva wants out of the Czech story because only in this way can she negotiate the experience of exile on her own terms.

As if political repression of the kind suffered by him and Eva were not enough, Sisovsky dramatizes Eastern Europe in Zuckerman's eyes even further by telling the American author about his late father; a Jewish writer who had been shot by a Gestapo officer before the world had a chance to discover his "deep and wonderful" stories written in a "Yiddish of Flaubert" (22). As in Updike's and Oates's stories, the region's tragic history is thus weaved into the contemporary image of communist Eastern Europe. However, as I will show later in this chapter, Roth is not afraid to subvert Sisovsky's narrative, as it is revealed that his story has been fabricated.

Fortunately, the Jewish stories have outlived their author, but Sisovsky cannot retrieve them because he is not allowed to return to Prague. To make matters worse, they remain in the possession of the Czech's ex-wife Olga, who refuses to hand them back in revenge for Sisovsky's numerous infidelities. What is then Zuckerman's role in this Eastern European imbroglio? A lover of women and books, the novelist is asked by Sisovsky to carry out a scheme that involves both: he is supposed to seduce Olga and thus make her give up the precious manuscripts.[126] So fascinated is Zuckerman with Sisovsky's story that it takes him less than a month to arrange a trip to communist Prague.

The novella is built out of three notebook entries chronicling Zuckerman's brief yet intense engagement with the Other Europe from the day he is visited by Sisovsky in his New York apartment (January 11th 1976) until his forced departure from Prague on

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[126] Harold Bloom identified the plot as "a deliberate parody of Henry James's 'Aspern Papers'" (n.pag.) An interesting discussion on intertextuality in *The Prague Orgy* can be found in Eric Sandberg's recent essay, "'Even the Faintest Imprint:' *The Prague Orgy* and the Fate of Intertextuality" (2014).

February 5th. Since Zukerman ventures behind the Iron Curtain privately, there are no official meetings to attend to, as was the case with Henry Bech and some of Oates's characters in *Last Days*. However, the reader expecting Zuckerman's first destination in Prague to be the kind of "samizdat party" that Timothy Garton Ash wrote about is in for a surprise. Roth challenges Western preconceptions about Eastern European oppression by sending Zuckerman to a fully-fledged orgy at a "seventeenth-century palazzo" belonging to Klenek, a Czech film director of dubious political loyalties (24). Although one would expect Zuckerman, the audacious and scandalous writer that he is at home, to be in his element, he seems to be disconcerted, even shocked by the whole affair. However, what he finds most disturbing are not the salacious scenes he witnesses at Klenek's, but the fact that it is the oppressed authors that indulge in them. Surprisingly for himself and the reader, the controversial and outspoken author of *Carnovsky* is placed in the role of a quiet, polite and respectable observer of Czech writers, whose behavior could not be further from his expectations:

> I am not fucking everyone, or indeed anyone, but sit quietly on the sofa being polite. I am dignified, well-behaved, reliable spectator, secure, urbane, calm, polite, the quiet respectable one who does not take his trousers off, and *these* are the menacing writers. All the treats and blandishments, all the spoils that spoil are mine, and yet what a witty, stylish comedy of manners these have-nots of Prague make out of their unbearable condition, this crushing business of being completely balked and walking the treadmill of humiliation. They, silenced, are all mouth. I am only ears—and plans, an American gentleman with the bracing if old-fashioned illusion that he is playing a worthwhile, dignified, and honorable role (36-37).

Rather than give voice to Zuckerman, Roth silences his alter ego, making the Czechs take the floor with verve and gusto. The gathering is dominated by two voices: one belonging to Bolotka, Zuckerman's Virgil in Prague and a fictional version of Ivan Klíma, and the other to Olga, Sisovsky's ex-wife and the guardian of his father's stories. Both voices are equally compelling, yet each represents a different Prague story. Olga used to be a bestselling author, but she is now a broken person; a heavy drinker looking for a temporary relief from her bleak existence in casual sex. "To fuck is the only freedom left in this country" (76), she boldly declares, but, as Kristian Versluys observed "Olga speaks of freedom but the freedom she enjoys is nothing but a desperate license fostered by the state's repressiveness" (316). Despite her raunchy language and equally uninhibited behavior, she is a pathetic character whose verbal vulgarity and obscene gestures expose helplessness and desperation in the face of a personal predicament. To the contrary, Rudolf Bolotka, a degraded theater director, takes his condition in his stride. In fact, he is there to pour "a little cold water" on Zuckerman's "free-world fantasies of virtuous political suffering" (26). When Zuckerman seems deeply upset at the sight of the Czech's "dank room at the top of a bleak stair well," Bolotka reassures him that he should not feel too bad about it, as the place "(…) was his hideaway from his wife long before his theatre was disbanded" (39). In a similar vein, he compares the secret police to literary critics, who see little and get most of it wrong anyway.

By showing such diverse attitudes and forms of coexistence with the system, Roth resists the one-sided story of oppression favored by the West, and gives voice to different narratives instead (Benatov, "Demystifying" 110). In doing so, he forces Zuckerman to verify his preconceptions of Czech dissidents but also rethink his own status as a writer. Throughout the novella, the American novelist is persistently faced

with situations that he has never lived through back home. In this sense, Prague emerges as a liminal space of reflection and confrontation, where the familiar rules of the game no longer apply. As mentioned before, Zuckerman's liminal experience in Prague not only mirrors Roth's but is also driven by the same question which engaged the American novelist. As he trades places with the dissident Sisovsky, Zuckerman is confronted with an absurd yet frighteningly real upside-down world that Roth discovered through Ivan Klíma, where "[t]he menial work is done by the writers and the teachers and the construction engineers, and the construction is run by the drunks and the crooks" (60-61). However, Roth is not merely recreating what he saw during his journey of discovery. As in *The Ghost Writer*, he goes a step further and proposes to play what Garton Ash termed the "if game" (148). Stepping into a large dingy café, he conjures up Prague counterlives for himself and some of the best American authors. In this extravagant daydream, William Styron washes glasses in a bar; Susan Sontag wraps up buns, while Nathan Zuckerman himself becomes a floor sweeper. What seems like a benign fantasy fueled by Bolotka's stories takes a menacing shape once Zuckerman discovers that he is not as untouchable as he thought. As opposed to Henry Bech and the characters from Oates's stories, Zuckerman is not shielded by the protective framework of American diplomacy; especially since he spends most of his time in Prague mingling with the dissident Bolotka and trying to obtain and then smuggle the forbidden manuscripts to the West. Thus, Zuckerman's Prague metamorphosis might be imaginary but it does carry some ominous, Kafkaesque tones: "*As Nathan Zuckerman awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed into his bed into a sweeper of floors in a railway café* (…). *A superfluous person with no responsibilities and nothing to do, he has the kind of good times you have in Dante's Inferno*" (80). Although Zuckerman eventually leaves Prague

unharmed, the question "what if?" lingers, and Roth's reader is invited to imagine what he/she would do in similar circumstances: cooperate with the state and thus continue publishing officially, or rather swallow one's pride and become a road sweeper, like Ivan Klíma. The question also drives Roth's reflections on the business of being an author in America. As explained in chapter 2, the political dimension of culture and the exceptional role writers played in the Other Europe led some Western intellectuals to proclaim literature from the region as superior to Western writing, especially given its thematic gravity and the risk involved in the process of writing in defiance of communist authorities. According to George Steiner, American literature, produced at leisure at creative writing centers and humanities research institutes, cannot bear comparison with dissident works whose merits are not only literary but also political. As Roth himself put it: "It always seemed to me that there was a certain amount of loose talk in the West about 'the muse of censorship' behind the Iron Curtain (…) there were even writers who envied the terrible pressure (…) and the clarity of the mission this burden fostered" (*Shop* 53). Roth's hands-on education in Czech culture and his friendship with banned authors made him wary of thinking in such black-and-white terms. He derides the simplistic division of literature into "serious" and "trivial" in *The Prague Orgy* when Bolotka tries on Zuckerman's expensive suit to, at least for a moment, feel like a like a rich American writer, while a Czech student wants to discuss with him a paper entitled tellingly: "The Luxury of Self-Analysis As It Relates to American Economic Conditions" (51). However, Steiner's stance is most poignantly ridiculed when the communist *Kulturminister* Novak, whose dandelion-like hair bears a striking resemblance to that of comrade Taru from "Bech in Rumania," lectures Zuckerman that Czechoslovakia "is not the

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United States of America where every freakish thought is a fit subject for writing, where there is no such thing as propriety, decorum, or shame" (81).

Roth admits that dealing with trivial subjects is a fact of life for American writers, but refuses to condemn American fiction as trivial just because it does not display the same thematic seriousness as the literature from behind the Iron Curtain: "To write a serious book that doesn't signal its seriousness with the rhetorical cues or thematic gravity that's traditionally associated with seriousness is a worthy undertaking too," he assures (*Reading* 145).[127] He also questions Steiner's definition of a writer as a martyr to truth ready to pay even the highest price to make his voice heard. Here is his ironic reaction to the critic's words: "I wonder (…) why all the writers I know in Czechoslovakia loathe the regime and passionately wish that it would disappear from the face of the earth. Don't they understand, as Steiner does, that this is their chance to be great?" (*Reading* 146). Roth insists that the totalitarian system does not singlehandedly produce great works of art, but rather damages the authors physically and spiritually, especially if it prevails as long as it does in Czechoslovakia.[128] Actual Czech writers seem to share his stance. In an interview with Roth, Klíma admits that physical work may provide some thought-provoking experience and inspiration for a writer; however, if it lasts too long it affects one's personality, exhausts their creative powers and breaks them down (*Shop* 54). Steiner's anti-hero in *The Professor of Desire* is professor Soska, who instead of creating a literary masterpiece winds up in hospital physically and mentally exhausted by the harrowing business of intellectual opposition. There is hardly anything heroic or

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[127] It is noteworthy that Roth's words echo Updike's stance on this subject, which I commented on in my discussion of "Bech in Czech."

[128] In "Demystifying the Logic of Tamizdat: Philip Roth's Anti-Spectacular Politics," Joseph Benatov interprets Roth's pronouncement in light of Klíma's critical reaction to his words published in *Harper's* in 1985, suggesting that the American author temporarily succumbed to Western tamizdat mentality. Extending his argument further, Benatov reads *The Prague Orgy* as "Roth's fictional mea culpa addressed to his Czech friend" (129).

enviable about Soska when he hastily says his farewells to Kepesh and Claire and rushes down the underground stairs to mislead the secret police spying on him. Instead of a Mandelstam-like oppositionist, Roth portrays somebody who has been denied personal freedom and stripped of dignity and privacy. However, even if professor Soska fails to live up to some Western standards of what an Eastern European intellectual should be like, he still represents an unrelenting, if much less spectacular spirit and belief in the power of literature. Unable to publish and exhausted by struggling against the system, he devotes himself to translation; an activity often taken up by those Czech writers who could not or wish not to publish officially (Holý 62). The work he chooses is an American masterpiece: Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), in which Soska finds energy, will and rage that he wishes to translate into Czech. His decision to translate rather than write may appear futile and inconsequential unless it is viewed from a broader perspective. As Jiří Holý observes in *Writers Under Siege: Czech Literature Since 1945* (2008), translation has always been an important part of Czech literature, aimed at propelling cultural development and sometimes even helping to subvert the status quo—as when the famous Shakespearean quotation "there is something rotten in the state of Denmark" was rendered as "there is something rotten in this country," in a clear reference to the political situation in communist Czechoslovakia (61). In this light, translating *Moby-Dick* may be read as an act of courage and faith in literature's influence on people's minds. The choice of novel is also significant. For Soska, Melville's work and American society at large are infused with qualities which are lacking in his home country and which the translator would like to inject into Czechoslovak society. American literature is thus endowed with a transnational significance and a potential to boost the stagnant cultural reality at the time. As I pointed out in relation to Kepesh's and Soska's respective readings of

Kafka's fictional universal, literature provides an intercultural threshold where the East and West meet in a productive and potentially transformative dialog.

In both works, Roth offers a complex, multi-layered image of the Czech capital in the grip of the regime. By sending his protagonists to Prague, he juxtaposes the position of an intellectual in a democratic society and under communism. In doing so, he problematizes each condition, challenging easy categorization proposed by Steiner. In this sense, Prague serves as a liminal space of discovery, compelling the characters to reconsider who they are. For Zuckerman, the transition has to with his identity as a man, a writer, and a Jew. As the mission of retrieving the manuscripts becomes increasingly gruesome, the American author begins to question the whole enterprise and his role in it: "*Why am I forcing the issue? What's the motive here? Is this a passionate struggle for those marvelous stories or the struggle toward self-caricature? Still the son, still the child, in strenuous pursuit of the father's loving response? (Even when the father is Sisovsky's?)*" (68). Zuckerman's Prague mission is therefore an ultimate attempt to appease the Jewish fathers that he has angered so in *The Ghost Writer*, *Zuckerman Unbound*, and *The Anatomy Lesson*. By rescuing the manuscripts written in the language of his antecedents from oblivion,[129] he is supposed to blot out the damage done by his own work; just like the possibility of marrying Anne Frank promised to redeem young Nathan's (literary) sins against Jews in *The Ghost Writer*. In others words, to bring the Jewish heritage back to life is Zuckerman's chance to, at last, set himself free from the trials that Roth has put him through in *Zuckerman Bound*. While Zuckerman's predicament bears no comparison to Joseph K.'s tribulations, he too fails miserably when the system decides to intervene with his

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[129] In "The Yiddish of Flaubert: *The Prague Orgy* and the Problem of Jewish Literature," Eitan Kensky argues that Roth's Eastern European journey is in fact a journey into "the meanings of Jewish writing" (202) whose tangible outcome is *The Prague Orgy*. Accordingly, Zuckerman's mission to recover the Yiddish stories written by Sisovsky's father is mapped as a "narrative discovery" questioning "where a Nathan Zuckerman—or a Philip Roth—belongs" in Jewish literary tradition (210).

literary mission. In consequence, the manuscripts get confiscated by the secret police and Zuckerman is driven to the airport in the company of the *Kulturminister* Novak as a "Zionist agent" (86). Adding to Roth's chagrin, he is ridiculed by the communist,[130] and mocked by Olga for being a "shallow, sentimental, American idiot Jew" (75). As it turns out, Sisovsky, whose dramatic story has won Zuckerman's heart and encouraged him to travel to Czechoslovakia, has lied to him about his father's tragic death in order to recover and then usurp his short stories.

While Franz Kafka's biography is a potent intertext in both works, in *The Prague Orgy* Roth "makes use of the life and work of a lesser-known Jewish Polish writer in his depiction of Nathan Zuckerman's struggles with cultural inheritance and literary influence in Prague" (Ravvin 53). This "unacknowledged literary father," to borrow Norman Ravvin's words, is obviously Bruno Schulz[131] whose death at the hands of a Nazi officer has been appropriated by the storyteller Sisovsky. By making Schulz part of the narrative, Roth incorporates the tragic history of the region and especially its Jewish population into the contemporary communist reality. However, how he does it is a far cry from Updike's and Oates's treatment of the Holocaust in their respective works. Turning Bruno Schulz's story into a mere fabrication made up by Sisovsky to get hold of his father's stories, Roth debunks his favorite myth of Jewish moral superiority, which he has been challenging since *Goodbye Columbus*. While Sisovsky is exposed as a fraud,[132] Nathan learns (once again the hard way) that "one's story isn't a skin to be shed—it's inescapable, one's body and blood" (84). His

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[130] Unwittingly, this fervent ideologue alludes to Zuckerman's crime of filial disrespect, which he has been charged with throughout *Zuckerman Bound*: "And your father, is he proud of you and does he think you are all you should be?" (81).

[131] Schulz's extraordinary works, *The Street of Crocodiles* (1934) and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* (1937) form part of the "Writers from the Other Europe" series edited by Roth for Penguin.

[132] This being Roth's story we cannot be sure who the villain is. After all, Sisovsky's hoax is revealed by Olga who has a number of reasons to hate her émigré ex-husband and bring him down in the eyes of a celebrated American author.

is a narrative of a recalcitrant Jewish son and, as the final installment of *Zuckerman Bound* poignantly shows, it cannot be re-written.

David Kepesh's journey of discovery in *The Professor of Desire* is also driven by literature, yet his is a different kind of story. Kepesh comes to Europe as a new man; having mastered his flesh into obedience, he has also managed to convince himself that a monogamous life at the side of Claire Ovington is exactly what he needs to sustain the narrative of moral renewal. Although in Venice he is haunted by visions of lewd scenarios enacted with his Swedish lover back in the day, Soska's misery together with the visit to the Jewish graveyard where Kafka's family lies buried sober him up:

> [W]hen we board the streetcar and sit down beside each other, I take [Claire's] hand and feel suddenly purged of yet another ghost, as de-Kafkafied by my pilgrimage to the cemetery as I would appear to have been de-Brigittized once and for all by that visitation on the terrace restaurant in Venice. My obstructed days are behind me—along with the *un*obstructed ones: no more "more" and no more nothing, either! (178).

But as Zuckerman's Prague trial has shown, shedding one's life story is not easy and though someone else's misery does put one's problems in perspective, it is not sufficient to make Kepesh a different man. Kafka's ghost comes back to haunt the American professor in a bizarre dream in which literature and sex are fused together in an unlikely figure of "Kafka's whore" (189), an aged prostitute whom the great Czech author used to visit. In a perverse reversal of literary tourism, Kepesh is offered a tour by another "master of ceremonies" (187); a Czech guide who turns out to be Herbie Bratasky, a prototypical "Jewboy" and David's childhood idol who "goes on to hold at least as much influence over the development of Kepesh as do Chekhov and Flaubert"

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(Parrish 23). Kepesh's disturbing dream shakes up his intentions of living a blissful life of domestic happiness with Claire, making him realize that for a man so obsessed with sensual pleasure such a metamorphosis is hardly possible. Although back in the States the couple move in together and Kepesh even introduces Claire to his father, his desire for her is inevitably waning away: "Oh, innocent beloved, you fail to understand and I can't tell you. I can't say it, not tonight, but within a year my passion will be dead. Already it is dying and I am afraid that there is nothing I can do to save it" (261). Who has done it to Kepesh? Is it the uncanny influence of the Other Europe? Like in *The Prague Orgy*, the Czech capital becomes a liminal catalyst for Kepesh's inner transformation. However, in a Kafkaesque twist, it only serves to clench him even tighter in his own, inescapable story.

The Other Europe functions as a transformative liminal space in Roth's work in yet another way. In Oates's "My Warszawa: 1980," Judith Horne finds the Polish capital alien and menacing. Similarly, Henry Bech grows frightened of the overwhelming history of the region which seems to lurk in almost every corner of old Prague. Interestingly, Zuckerman's experience of the Czech capital is quite the opposite. Walking the streets of Prague, he feels as if he had known the place all his life. Narrow, cobblestone streets and oppressive atmosphere remind him of a prototypical Jewish homeland he imagined as a child, when collecting money for the Jewish National Fund and listening to his relatives' stories about their life in the Old World. In Zuckerman's private imaginative geography of the Old World, contemporary communist Prague evokes a city that little Nathan imagined "the Jews would buy when they had accumulated enough money for a homeland" (62). Projecting his childhood imaginings onto contemporary Prague, Zuckerman maps the Czech capital as "a used city, a broken city, a city so worn and grim that nobody else would even put in a bid" (62). In so

doing, he evokes the familiar trope of Eastern Europe as a liminal construct straddling two temporal dimensions. However, in spite of its decrepit state, this half-real, half-imaginary city is alive and bursting with stories: "In this used city, one would hear endless stories being told—on benches, in the park, in kitchens at night, while waiting your turn at the grocery or over the clothesline in the yard, anxious tales of harassment and flight, stories of fantastic endurance and pitiful collapse" (63). Stories, this "national industry of the Jewish homeland" (63), provide a link between Zuckerman's prototypical Jewish city and the present-day Prague. Roth moves seamlessly from honoring Jewish narrative ingenuity to appraising the literary culture of Czechoslovakia. Verging on the spectacular, Zuckerman dramatically declares that "[i]n Prague stories aren't simply stories; it's what they have instead of life. Here they have become their stories, in lieu of being permitted to be anything else. Storytelling is the form their resistance has taken against the coercion of the powers-that-be" (64). In associating Jewish stories with Eastern European "tales of resistance," Roth charts a common cultural space in the best tradition of *Central* Europe—an impressive literary map populated by such writers as Franz Kafka, Jaroslav Hašek, and Bruno Schulz, but also contemporary authors from the Other Europe: Milan Kundera, Ivan Klíma, Witold Gombrowicz, Tadeusz Konwicki, and others published in the Penguin series edited by Roth. As mentioned in chapter 2, Central European literary identity is said to be distinguished by a peculiar jocularity which bears much resemblance to the Jewish sense of humor. In *The Prague Orgy*, Zuckerman observes that, besides the ubiquitous stories, the Jewish homeland thrives on jokes "because beneath the ordeal of perpetual melancholia and the tremendous strain of just getting through, a joke is always lurking somewhere" (63). The same is true for Prague which, for all its wretchedness, brims with sharp irony and wry humor. Although the most notable representative of the

Prague spirit is obviously Bolotka, Sisovsky, Kalinova, and Olga are its worthy ambassadors too. It is their tragicomic stories that turn *The Prague Orgy* into "a single, sustained punch line from beginning to end," packed tight with "all of Roth's wit and extravagance, his anger and his social conscience, his sexiness and his contempt for authority" (Shechner 104).

In a manner akin to Henry Bech in "Rich in Russia," by visiting Eastern Europe Zuckerman revisits his Old-World roots, as Prague reminds him of his "ancestors' Poland" and "the Jewish Atlantis of an American childhood dream" (64). Zuckerman's feelings mirror Roth's. On coming back from Prague, he wrote:

> Never in the lengthy visits I had made over the years to England, France, or Italy had I felt myself to be anything other than an American passing through. Within the first few hours of walking in these streets, I understood that a connection of sorts existed between myself and this place (…). Looking for Kafka's landmarks, I had, to my surprise, come upon some landmarks that felt to me like my own ("In Search" n. pag.).

Instead of being just a mere passenger through the exotic world of Eastern Europe, Roth let himself be absorbed into the historical substance of the place, which, to his astonishment, struck a chord with some of his deepest memories and childhood daydreams. There is a thought-provoking contrast between Roth's feelings toward Prague and John Updike's appraisal of the world behind the Iron Curtain. When Updike arrived in Switzerland, he immediately felt relieved to be back in the civilized world; to be back in Europe proper and thus closer to the United States of America. For Roth, Prague felt like home, because "here, as far from Newark as Roth could get, he found another living moral subject, complete with historical weight, threats of exposure, and difficult claims of loyalty" (Roth Pierpont 88).

5.3. Conclusions

If Roth's path toward professional development and personal growth is perceived in terms of a rite of passage, then his travels to Prague served as a veritable laboratory of the author's creative energies, which culminated in *The Prague Orgy*; a work which Harold Bloom proclaimed in 1985 "(…) the best of Roth, a kind of coda to all his fiction so far" (n. pag.). Even if the idea of the Other Europe was rendered moot in 1989, the novella has not lost its appeal. This, I believe, has to do with Roth's profound connection with the region and the effect it has had on his life and fiction. To treat the experience of Eastern Europe and Prague in particular as liminal is to account for the manifold ways in which it imbued Roth's writing.[133] It is also to acknowledge that the American author approached it with an attitude of a "neophyte" ready to embrace everything it had to offer, without prejudice. However, the same cannot be said about Zuckerman, whose clichéd view on dissident writers is called into question during his visit to Prague. That said, from the perspective of imagology, Roth's Prague works do not display such profusion of national stereotypes as Updike's and Oates's short stories. This, I believe, might be related to Roth's sustained engagement with Czech culture, which led him to take a broader and more nuanced view of the other. Still, it must be remembered that Roth's representation of Eastern Europe is much limited in scope, as it only focuses on a small and hardly representative group of Czechoslovak society—the dissident circle of Prague. By singling out Prague, Roth elevates it to the status of the cultural center of the Other Europe, and a symbol of literature's capacity to transcend political realities. At the same time, he avoids sensationalizing communism and idealizing dissident intellectuals. In fact, Czech dissidents portrayed by Roth

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[133] Besides *The Professor of Desire*, traces of the Other Europe are also present in some way or another in such works as *Deception* (1990) or *Operation Shylock* (1993) testifying to the region's imprint on Philip Roth's thematic interests.

represent different vantage points reflecting the country's complex cultural reality and the author's personal relationship with the proscribed writers. As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, many native intellectuals were initially party members who believed in socialism. As a matter of fact, the Prague Spring reform movement sprang from within the party, and was aimed at transforming the existent system into a more humane, pro-citizen "socialism with a human face." Roth himself befriended authors who pursued extremely different paths: Kundera chose the life of an émigré writer in France (for which he was criticized by his compatriots), whereas Klíma decided to stay on in occupied Prague. Furthermore, in *The Prague Orgy* Roth gives voice to a character representing the opposite side of the struggle: the communist Minister of Culture.[134] Although Novak's tirade is pure propaganda, it does carry a word of caution: there is more to Czechoslovakia than just dissident writers, and those who, like Zuckerman, think otherwise fail to see a bigger picture.

Roth's Prague does not lend itself to easy classification. In a truly liminal fashion, as much as the city is captivating, it is also intangible and leaks through the fingers of those who try to pin it down and judge it according to narrow, ready-made standards. The way Roth depicts Prague in both works brings to mind Sabina's paintings in Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. On the surface, they show one thing, but underneath lurks something else, forcing the viewers to revise their first impressions of the artifact. In Roth's Prague, nothing is what it seems, and both Kepesh and Zuckerman have to verify their preconceptions of the place and themselves. As a result, their respective missions end in a fiasco. Conversely, Roth's own mission did prove successful. Roth's on and off travels to Prague inspired his writing and provided an all-round education about the political dimension of art. His confrontation with the

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[134] *The Prague Orgy* is thus a polyphonic novella which, in a sense, heralds Roth's later experiments in multi-voiced fiction, most notably *Operation Shylock*, which I briefly referred to in my critical sketch of the American author.

world of Eastern European culture and his friendship with dissident authors shaped his stance on the role of the writer and literature in society. It also opened up the door to a rich literary universe of the region, which, in turn, resulted in Penguin's Eastern European series—a palpable proof of Roth's deep interest in the literature of the Other Europe—not just because of its political dimension but rather due to its literary quality. On a more personal level, Prague provided a missing link between the author and his Old-World Jewish heritage. Eastern Europe seen through Roth's eyes is hardly a static construct, a bloc. Instead, it is a dynamic, contradictory and open-ended space which cannot be reduced to arbitrary political mappings. In his portrayal of Prague, Roth avoided succumbing to clichés and common truths about life behind the Iron Curtain, advancing instead a representation which stresses the place's ambiguous, liminal character. At the same time, he skillfully turned it into a source of inspiration and literary material, reflecting his preoccupation with the uneasy relationship between art, politics, and identity.

6. Coda

> The revolution of 1989 in Eastern Europe has largely invalidated the
> perspective of half-century, compelling the reconsideration of Europe as
> a whole. The maps on the wall have always showed a continent of many
> colors, the puzzle pieces of many states; the dark line of the iron curtain,
> supplying the light and shadow in front and behind, was drawn on the
> maps on the mind. Those maps must be adjusted, adapted, reconceived,
> but their structures are deeply rooted and powerfully compelling (Wolff,
> *Inventing* 3).

Larry Wolff's study, which is one of the fundamental sources for this dissertation, forms part of an enormous body of work published following "the revolution of 1989." The fall of the Iron Curtain, most spectacularly embodied by the dismantling of the Berlin Wall, proved to be also an academic watershed; to say that Eastern Europe (under different designations and in varied shapes) has been debated, analyzed, and dissected from every possible angle is not an exaggeration. At the same time, the lifting of the Iron Curtain allowed for an unprecedented freedom of travel and thus direct contacts between East and West, which in turn resulted in an upsurge of travel literature: guides, travelogues, memoirs, and the so-called "narratives of return,"[135] concerned with the lands of Eastern Europe. In addition, new Eastern Europe attracted also a new wave of travelers: young Westerners with familiar agendas—to see history in the making—but also new projects in store; to, with a bit of luck, ride the wave of transition. In what follows, I will address some main strands in contemporary critical treatment of Eastern Europe, and then discuss several works which dramatize the new kind of travel

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[135] The term is used by Andaluna Borcila in a chapter dealing with post-1989 travel accounts in *American Representations of Post-Communism: Television, Travel Sites, and Post-Cold War Narratives*.

mentioned above, with the aim of shedding some light on American imaginative geographies of the region in post-1989 era.

6.1. Post-communist Eastern Europe: Critical Trends and Avenues of Research

The deep sociopolitical changes that the region has undergone in the last twenty-five years have inevitably affected the ways of approaching Eastern Europe as a scholarly subject. In *Over the Wall/After the Fall: Postcommunist Cultures Through an East-West Gaze* (2004), Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena Zaborowska, and Elena Gapova advocate introducing multidisciplinary perspectives into hitherto traditional Eastern European studies. By calling Eastern Europe "the Second World," they foreground the need to strive for an in-between space of critical exchange allowing "for a more nuanced appreciation of local realities and for less-narrow possibilities of imagining a nation's identity" (6). To approach post-communist Eastern Europe in the contemporary context, is thus to move beyond the reductive binaries of East and West, while at the same time problematizing and challenging these ever-present categories. Gone are the times when the conceptualization of Eastern Europe as a homogenous bloc could be explained by its "common denominator:" the shared experience of communism. Following the transitions of 1989, former communist states pursued different paths of development and this sociopolitical diversity is now being addressed by critics who, through their biographies, education, and scholarly interests, "cross boundaries" between East and West (27). The East-West dichotomy is also complicated by the fact that, as Kathleen Starck observed in the introduction to *When the World Turned Upside-Down: Cultural Representations of Post-1989 Eastern Europe* (2009), "Eastern Europe has started to reside within the West in the form of thousands of immigrants from new

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member states of the European Union (…), but also from the Soviet Union" (3). The way this coexistence shapes cultural representations within the British context has been addressed, among others, in a recent, multidisciplinary publication, *Facing the East in the West: Images of Eastern Europe in Literature, Film, and Culture* (2010). In this connection, I am quite convinced that the study of national representations with the help of *supranational* imagology, aimed, among others, at exposing and debunking pernicious stereotypes and binary divides within Europe and beyond may indeed contribute to the project of understanding the region in all its complexity.

However, the designation "Second World" used by Forrester, Zaborowska, and Gapova with respect to Eastern Europe's liminal position between East and West, is also a gesture to those whom the editors of the collection call "allies in theory:"

> As the Other Europe comes to terms with its ambivalent past, it must learn from the experience of Third World peoples (…). The Third and Second Worlds face similar decisions and negotiations over what to keep and what to discard from an era when external oppression may nonetheless have stimulated the creation of vibrant oppositional cultures (16).

By the same token, postcolonial studies may offer perspectives and tools for approaching the uneasy dialogs between new Eastern Europe and its communist legacies, as well as the relationship between this reconfigured space and "the West." Does it mean that Eastern Europe should be treated as a colonial subject? Speaking about the Balkans, Andrew Hammond draws a connection between "the West's interference in the region" that "has exacerbated, even created, many of what are interpreted as purely Balkan issues," and Western "colonial discourse" on the Balkans which, between 1989 and 9/11, mapped the area as "a locale of such unnatural depravity that no other recourse is possible than to foreign rule" (149). Conversely, Maria

Todorova is wary of applying the "Orientalist model" to the Balkans, pointing out that "unlike orientalism, which is a discourse about an imputed opposition, balkanism is a discourse about an imputed ambiguity" (*Imagining* 17). In other words, the region's simultaneous inclusion in and exclusion from Europe (they might be considered peripheral, but the Balkans form part of Europe) problematizes the colonial model of the imperial master and the subaltern. Furthermore, says Todorova, Balkan self-perception needs to be borne in mind, as there has always been "the consciousness of a certain degree of autonomy" there (*Imagining* 17). A valuable point has also been raised in a very recent study mapping Ireland's cultural connections with Eastern Europe. As Eve Patten and Aidan O'Malley point out, "[t]he transitions of the region inevitably upset the smooth assimilative workings of a Balkanist discourse, and blanket treatment of Central and Eastern Europe in terms of a homogenized historical subject, whether imperial (to Constantinople or Vienna), military (Berlin) or communist (Moscow)" (9).

A more explicitly postcolonial stance emerges from Nataša Kovačević's work on Eastern Europe in *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization* (2008). While acknowledging Todorova's reluctant position, the Serbian-American scholar, drawing on Larry Wolff's study among others, maps the discursive relationship between East and West in "proto-colonial" terms:

I argue that [Todorova's] line of thinking ultimately obfuscates a long history of Western attempts to identify itself as enlightened, developed and civilized in distinction to Eastern Europe and as a result, to intellectually master Eastern Europe through description and classification, fixing it into stereotypes of lamentable cultural, political and economic backwardness (…), or alternately praiseworthy conservation of its "noble savages" (2).

Extending the postcolonial framework into post-1989 reality, Kovačević points out that nowadays the West's "civilizing project" bears the corporate logo of the European Union, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank, as the former Eastern Bloc countries are, both internally and externally, disciplined into political, economic and social westernization "in order to become emancipated as 'European'" (1). However, Kovačević problematizes also colonial hierarchy by listening to the subaltern speak about their "preoccupation (…) with their various reflections in the Western mirror and concomitant self-stigmatizations or self-celebrations;" their "voluntary—and largely unrecognized—self-colonizing tendency vis-á-vis the West" (4). Although her line of thinking is more consistently postcolonial than that of Forrester, Zaborowska and Gapova, she too calls for a critical open-endedness in approaching Eastern Europe, which entails "keep[ing] the borders of Eastern Europe open and shifting, while analyzing ways in which the [Eastern European] narratives themselves engage with this imaginary geography" (13). For Kovačević, deconstructing the binary discourse means also examining Eastern Europe's knotty relationship with its communist legacies; "the inability of the present to shake off the specters of the past which it continually proclaims to be dead" (18). A similar appeal is expressed by Marta Rabikowska in *The Everyday of Memory: Between Communism and Post-Communism* (2013), which argues that "as it passes through the walls dividing Eastern and Western Europe, the memory of communism has the power to challenge the ideologically constructed binary relationship between East and West, and feed into a new democratic picture of Europe" (2). Inscribing itself into a broad critical trend of examining various incarnations of Eastern European *ostalgia*, the volume seeks to engage with "micro and macro perspectives on everydayness" of communist/post-communist memory as a means of "mov[ing] towards multidisciplinarity and non-essentialism, which offer a ground for

rethinking the concepts of transition, post-communist identity, democracy, and modernity in conjunction with indetermination, difference, alterity, and instability" (6).

I find the above considerations particularly valuable also in the context of my work, which maps East-West dynamics from the perspective of image studies. In spite of the fact that my discussion is more "traditional" in this respect, as it focuses on Western representation of Eastern Europe and not the other way round, it also advocates a nuanced approach by exposing Eastern Europe's liminal status within the American literary imaginary. As explained in chapter 1, liminality has been successfully adopted and shaped by scholars of postcolonial orientation. While I do not map Eastern Europe as a colonial terrain, I try to expose the cracks and interstices within the auto- and hetero-images explored in the works under discussion. In doing so, I do not shy away from the "Orientalist model" casting Eastern Europe as a monolithic bloc, but rather attempt to elucidate the coexistence of several types of mental images. I see little value in fixing the West's representational discourse of Eastern Europe within a rigid us/them dialectics. Although such a narrative of difference forms part of the fictional material I analyze in this dissertation, it is hardly the only one, and to claim so would be a move toward imagological reductionism. This is not to suggest, however, that by the mere fact of applying the liminal metaphor to my reading of American visions of Eastern Europe I can freely re-map the pre-1989 East-West relationships explored here as open and dialogic. In fact, the ambivalence and ambiguity in imagining the other which liminality implies, may lead to representations which are blatantly reductive, as they lock Eastern Europe in a clichéd narrative of "the land of contradictions," or an ahistorical amalgam of past and present. This is evident in Henry Bech's stories and partly present in Joyce Carol Oates's fictional take on the area. Conversely, the above-mentioned representational ambiguity may also foreground the area's generative, unwieldy

potential and its position as a cultural "contact zone," as is the case in Philip Roth's writings on Prague. In light of the above discussion of contemporary critical voices, liminality, and the qualities it entails, presents itself as a productive framework, if not something of a paradigm, for studying cultural representations of Eastern Europe at the level of individual and collective experience.

Within the critical spectrum afforded by postcolonial theory, such authors as Clare Cavanagh (2004) and Aleksander Fiut (2009), among others, postulate a scholarly direction which seems historically plausible, if not natural. Focusing on the work of Joseph Conrad and his literary heirs in post-war Poland, Cavanagh urges to rectify "the strategic forgetfulness" in contemporary postcolonial theory by exploring the "Second World colonies;" the peoples with a long-term experience of Eastern imperialism (82, 84). In accordance with Cavanagh's line of thinking, Fiut proposes to move away from the "tendency to dwell exclusively on the cultural and economic imperialism practiced by the Western European powers," and shift critical attention instead onto "Russia's colonial practices" with respect to countries like Poland, as well as those nations which "still remain in the grip of the former Soviet empire" (n. pag.). Within the latter group, I would single out Ukraine, particularly in light of its ongoing violent tensions with the Russian Federation which have been tormenting the region since 2013—an issue which will undoubtedly receive much critical attention in the near future. Importantly for this dissertation, Fiut's words also point to the problem of different Europes, which I have discussed in chapter 2 from a historical and cultural angle, focusing on such concepts and/or entities as Eastern Europe, Mitteleuropa, and Central Europe. Nonetheless, this chapter seems to be the right place to address this issue from the post-1989 perspective. To do so, however, I need to briefly return to the point where I left off.

Writing in 1986, Timothy Garton Ash observes that "there is a basic sense in which the term *Central Europe* (…) is obviously useful. If it merely reminds an American or British newspaper reader that East Berlin, Prague, and Budapest are not quite in the same position as Vladivostok (…)—then it serves a good purpose" (180). The desire to make the West see that Eastern Europe is *not* Russia underlies also Kundera's "The Tragedy of Central Europe." As I mentioned in chapter 2, Garton Ash looks for the idea of Central Europe in the works of three emblematic thinkers from the region, Václav Havel, Adam Michnik, and György Konrád: "[I]f there really is some common Central European ground, we can reasonably expect to discover it in the political essays of these three authors. If we do not find it here, it probably does not exist" (183). At the same time, however, the "Central European spirit" embodied by these thinkers is not homogenous, since each author approaches it from the perspective of his own national circumstances.[136] Furthermore, Garton Ash points to historical and geographical ambiguities which complicate the narrative of Central Europe as "Western, rational, humanistic, democratic, skeptical, and tolerant" (184). In doing so, he problematizes the universality of the Central European discourse as a valid counter-narrative to that of *Eastern Europe*: "[T]his new Central Europe is just that: an idea. It does not yet exist. Eastern Europe exists—that part of Europe militarily controlled by the Soviet Union. The new Central Europe has yet to be created" (210). The question is: has it and if so, what shape has it taken?

The title of Iver B. Neumann's 2000 essay, "Forgetting the Central Europe of the 1980s," maps a conceptual shift which the term had undergone within a decade since the collapse of communism. In Neumann's words, "[w]ith the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the Central European discourse spread from being

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[136] Adam Michnik for instance does not refer to Central Europe at all in his writings (Garton Ash 204).

mainly the preserve of those artists and intellectuals who were self-proclaimed Central Europeans, to also involving West European intellectuals and Central European intellectuals" (209). In consequence, the idea of Central Europe entered the sphere of *Realpolitik*; or, to put it differently, what used to be just a perception turned into a political project. Neumann observes that the Central European narrative had a bearing on the process of shaping post-1989 Europe, which gradually opened up its military and political structures to the former Eastern European states: Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. In this sense, the countries' entry into the NATO system in 1991 followed by their accession to the European Union in 2004, represent a story of success and triumph of Central European spirit and resilience. However, is this so for everybody? In her response to Neumann's essay Maria Todorova observes that the notion of Europe comprises two kinds of categories: marked and unmarked. While "Eastern Europe" has always been a marked category, "the whole point about the Central European representation was to argue that it was an organic part of Western Europe (or just Europe) taken temporarily hostage by the East, by a 'different civilization'" (226). By entering the institutionalized structures of Europe, Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary abandoned the marked category of Eastern Europe, and became part of the unmarked category of Europe (proper). Other ex-communist republics, like Bulgaria and Romania, stayed where they had been—trapped in the unglamorous pigeonhole of Eastern Europe.

When speaking about the Central European spirit in the writings of Havel and Konrad, Garton Ash pointed to the internal mental mappings practiced by these authors. When the context was neutral or negative they would opt for the term "Eastern Europe." Conversely, "Central Europe" was reserved for a positive or "downright sentimental" tone (184). In *Imagining the Balkans*, Todorova makes a similar argument with

reference to Western commentators' attitude to the new Central Europe: "(…) the Central European countries are called Central European only when something positive is meant. When not, there is a reversal to the notion of Eastern Europe" (157). Today, when the European Union has embraced Romania, Bulgaria, and Croatia, while Albania, Montenegro, Serbia, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia are on the waiting list to join the club, the hackneyed designations appear to make increasingly less sense. However, it seems to me that the practice described by Garton Ash and Todorova has not lost currency. It is not my intention to venture into the analysis of the various malaises and divisions within contemporary Europe, as it is neither the topic of this dissertation, nor my field of research. Nevertheless, I wish to devote some attention to the internal and external mental mappings that have accompanied the recent conflict in Ukraine.

The conflict began when the Ukrainian pro-Russian government failed to sign a trade and political agreement with the European Union in favor of stronger ties with Russia. This caused a wave of protests and civil unrest in Kiev. Thousands of Ukrainians flooded the Maidan Square to voice their pro-European stance; the desire to form part of Europe, like, for instance, neighboring Poland. With brutal pacification of protesters, violence escalated and the conflict gained in strength and intensity, spilling beyond the capital. What started as a peaceful pro-European movement transformed into an anti-governmental revolt which culminated in President Yanukovych's impeachment and the establishment of a new government. In an effort to salvage its influence in Ukraine, Russia annexed Crimea, while pro-Russian separatists began controlling territory in Eastern Ukraine.

In *American Representations of Post-Communism* Andaluna Borcila foregrounds the importance of television in shaping Western perceptions of Eastern Europe

emerging from communism: "The disintegration of communism happened on television, and television produced the spectacle of collapsing communism as a series of media and news events" (2). In 2014, Western audiences accessed the conflict in Ukraine not only through dramatic footage from Kiev, Donetsk, or Donbas, but also through social media. In an emblematic "I am a Ukrainian" viral video published on YouTube and watched by more than eight million viewers, a young Ukrainian, Yulia Marushevska, explains the reason behind the Maidan protests: "I want you to know why thousands of people all over my country are on the streets. There is only one reason: We want to be free from a dictatorship."[137] Although Marushevska reminds the viewer that Ukraine "is not a Soviet Union" anymore, the effect is quite the opposite. Looking at the violent scenes from Kiev, it is hard to avoid the feeling that history has come full circle and Russia still wields its "iron fist" over Eastern Europe, this time curtailing Ukraine's freedom and preventing it from moving toward European integration. In other words, the video maps the conflict in terms of a familiar East-West divide, leaving out the complex Ukrainian landscape of ethnic and national affiliations, which problematizes clear-cut divisions into civilized, pro-European Ukrainians and their Russian enemies.

Similar, though perhaps more deliberate and calculated mental mappings can be spotted in the press. As Alan Cowell observed in *The New York Times*, "with Vladimir V. Putin's takeover of Crimea and the massing of Russian troops near eastern Ukraine, the Cold War lexicon has been dusted off, along with the logic that underlay it" (n. pag). As journalists and politicians speak about the ideological divide between East and West and Vladimir Putin's imperialist ambitions in the region, it seems that the old rhetoric of the Iron Curtain is still casting a dark shadow over Europe—this time however it has moved further eastward mentally solidifying Ukraine's separation not only from the

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[137] The video was recorded by a British cinematographer Graham Mitchell and made public by an American filmmaker Ben Moses.

traditionally Western part of Europe, but also from the countries which used to belong to Eastern Europe, but are now "Western," or at least "Central" in comparison. But is it really so? Have the Višegrad group countries dropped the "E" for "Eastern" once and for all?

When the European Union announced the election of the Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk as President of the European Council, *The New York Times* ran the article entitled "In Nod to Eastern Europe, E.U. Names Poland Premier to Key Post," evoking the familiar homogeneity and highlighting the communist legacies of Eastern Europe:

> The selection of Mr. Tusk, 57, is the latest sign that Poland is emerging as a larger player in European affairs, particularly on issues involving the bloc's *eastern front*. His government has been among the most vocal critics of Russia's activities in Ukraine, even calling for a larger Western military presence in Poland and other *former Eastern Bloc states* (Kanter n. pag., my emphasis).

This perhaps should not come as a surprise. As Anne Applebaum pointed out in her 2013 lecture, "Does Eastern Europe still Exist?," despite the fact that "Eastern Europe" as a political concept no longer exists, it still forms part of Western vocabulary. Applebaum deconstructs the idea of Eastern Europe by elaborating on diverse paths of development followed by the ex-communist countries, and highlighting differences rather than similarities among them. Capitalizing on the fact the economic crisis did not start in Eastern Europe but in "proper Western countries" like Ireland and Greece, Applebaum urges to "toss out" stereotypes and clichés about "Europe's political geography," as the conceptual divisions into East and West and North and South do not seem to make sense anymore.

As the above examples have hopefully shown, mental mappings regarding "Eastern," "Central," and "Western" Europe still thrive on both sides of the former Iron

Curtain. Particularly in media, these labels are applied liberally, depending on the shifting balance of power within current geopolitical context. While it is unlikely that these shortcut designations disappear from use, it is crucial to be aware of the schematic quality of the mental images they conjure, independently whether these are positive or negative. Furthermore, we must bear in mind, to borrow imagological terminology, who the spectant is and what their relationship to the spected is. It is perhaps the only way to avoid the hypocrisy of denouncing somebody else for stereotyping us, while at the same time pigeonholing others. To put it differently, if I as a Pole find the label "Eastern Europe" reductionist, I should make sure not to apply it to neighboring Ukraine by citing Poland's "Central European" credentials, whatever these may mean. Therefore, recognizing this "double bind" of stereotyping is perhaps one of the challenges of studying national representations within a multinational and interdisciplinary context of post-socialist cultural studies.

While the above section aimed at tracing some critical tendencies in the study of post-1989 Eastern Europe, as well as commenting on the conceptualizations of the region which I signaled in section 2.3. from an up-to-date perspective, I wish to dedicate the rest of this chapter to introducing some American representations of Eastern Europe following the collapse of communism. By doing so, I hope to find out how the events of 1989 shaped American perspectives on the region, as negotiated through selected works of literature. I will start by zooming the imagological lens in on a work which merits the term "liminal" for several reasons: Eva Hoffman's *Exit into History: A Journey Through the New Eastern Europe* (1993).

6.2. New Eastern Europe under American Eyes: Some Imagological Concerns

Since the last work discussed in this dissertation was published in 1985, Hoffman's 1993 book serves as a bridge between the "old" and the "new." *Exit into History* offers fascinating insights into Eastern Europe at the crossroads of the past and the future; leaving the ossified skeleton of communism behind and moving toward new democratic destinies. In addition, the work does not lend itself to easy categorization. Written in the first person, it combines shrewd, objective insights with intimate, emotionally-charged observations, mapping the eponymous new Eastern Europe as a place made of fact and fiction. Finally, Hoffman's point of view as an author is singularly liminal, as it straddles a medley of perspectives: Jewish, Polish, American.

Andaluna Borcila situates Hoffman's work within a post-1989 trend of "narratives of return," written by Westerners of Eastern European extraction. Indeed, at the tender age of thirteen Hoffman, neé Wydra, left her native Cracow to emigrate with her parents and younger sister to Canada. Having graduated from high school she then moved to the U.S. where she studied literature and music. The experience of forging a new identity across the Atlantic is conveyed in Hoffman's most famous work, *Lost in Translation* (1989). Speaking about her own emigration in "The New Nomads," an essay concerned with modern experience of exile, Hoffman captures the psychological state which accompanied estrangement from her original homeland back in the 1950s: "[O]ne certain outcome of exile that takes place in a bipolar world is the creation of a bipolar personal world. Spatially, the world becomes riven into two parts, divided by an impassable barrier. Temporally, the past is all of a sudden on one side of a divide, the present on the other" (47). As a result of this internal "iron curtain," "the lost homeland becomes sequestered in the imagination as a mythic, static realm" (51). In this sense,

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Exit into History is not just a sociological field research aimed at capturing "history in the making," and translating Eastern European transitions for the Western audience, but also a sentimental journey into "an idealized landscape of the mind" (Hoffman, *Exit* ix). It is noteworthy that this mental panorama is not limited to Hoffman's native Poland, but encompasses other countries as well. In a manner reminiscent of the enlightened travelers from Larry Wolff's study, Hoffman not only projects her feelings toward Poland onto other members of the former Eastern Bloc ("Poland—and by extension Eastern Europe") but she also outlines the contours of *her* Eastern Europe by joining together the countries that "could all plausibly be said to have been part of the older eastern Europe, as well as the postwar one," and excluding those whose "exit from Communism was following highly exceptional routes" (ix, xiii). As a result, the author's Eastern Europe comprises Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria, while leaving out East Germany, Yugoslavia, and Albania. At the same time, Hoffman realizes that Eastern Europe has long been the object of Western mental mapping: "Our psyches seem to be so constructed that we need and desire an imagined 'other'—either a glimmering, craved, idealized other, or an other that is dark, savage and threatening. Eastern Europe has served our needs in this respect very well" (x). Indeed, *Exit into History* engages with the Janus-faced hetero-images of Eastern Europe that I have discussed in chapter 2: Eastern Europe as a backward monolithic bloc, but also "a heroic region struggling against a demonic dystopia" (2). While the author diagnoses the former representation as a dominant narrative in the West, she is *au courant* with other stereotypes, such as the one about Eastern Europe's cultural superiority bred by living and creating under totalitarianism. Therefore, Hoffman comes to Eastern Europe not only equipped with considerable knowledge regarding each country, but also wary of the stereotypes which have accrued around the region. Yet

while she is well-aware of the "distinct histories, traditions, and identities," as well as the debate about "Central Europe," she nonetheless opts for gathering them under the umbrella term of "Eastern Europe," "for the sake of simplicity and convenience" (xii). Yet one might equally argue that Hoffman's decision is also motivated by the fact that her work is addressed predominantly to the Western audience, and that it is for their sake that she wishes to translate not only the changes taking place there, but also something of the Eastern European character. Accordingly, as much as she is averse to stereotyping, she is always on the lookout for patterns and models of behavior that would make Eastern Europe more comprehensible as a whole to the Western eyes. In fact the "we" in Hoffman's narrative is a distinctly Western point of view; the point of view of America. By the same token, the West provides her with a yardstick by which she measures the body of Eastern Europe, or at least its better-functioning parts, like Hungary. At times, however, she has to forsake her Western standards entirely, as is the case with Romania, whose image stands out as the darkest and most depressing of the whole work.

As a writer, Hoffman is inclined to take a closer look at Eastern Europe's national cultures, paying special attention to those writers, artists, and intellectuals who remained independent under the weight of the regime. When talking about the knotty marriage of culture and politics, she does not shy away from such mental generalizations as "the archetypal Eastern European pattern of rebellion" (192), or "a classic Central European face" (which she uses with reference to György Konrád) (212). Neither does she refrain from mapping Eastern European commonalities. Therefore, she reiterates the well-known assumption that time flows differently in Eastern Europe, points to "that Eastern European darkness," and observes that Eastern Europeans "seem to know fewer taboos," to name but a few of many such statements

that run through *Exit into History* (213,168). However, while Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and, to a lesser extent Bulgaria, do lend themselves to this kind of pattern-seeking mental mapping, notwithstanding their national idiosyncrasies that Hoffman always strives to point out, Romania sticks out like a sore thumb. From the very first line of her account, Hoffman unashamedly casts the country as the "dark other," calling it her "Bermuda Triangle of the mind, a place that concentrates all one's anxieties about unnamable dangers and the darkness of the unknown" (232). Along the same lines, on the outset of her journey into this "imaginary heart of darkness" Hoffman evokes the familiar figure of Count Dracula (235). The images that Hoffman offers us subsequently only confirm the above preconceptions. As much as the author tries to judge the country according to the Eastern European "standards" or "archetypes," established during her previous travels, she fails miserably, for Bucharest, dilapidated, impoverished and still torn by violence, "seems barely to cling to the edge of the continent, threatening to fall off into some other space, some other idea entirely" (256). Romania is thus mapped not only as menacing and inimical to visitors, but particularly as deeply troubled by its numerous internal afflictions: violence, corruption, poverty, economic backwardness, but also human passivity and ambivalence. This in turn translates into the appearance of Romanians whom the author describes using what Andaluna Borcila has called a "pseudo-clinical" discourse (159): "The Bucharest faces are pasty, pale, prematurely worn; bodies often contorted in odd ways, sometimes deformed. But there's something else that troubles me—a sort of amorphousness of feature, a lack of sharpness, of expressive definition" (256). Hoffman's dramatic representation of Romania culminates with a visit to one of the infamous orphanages, which the writer decides to see "out of some sense of duty" (289). Although she offers just a few vignettes of the place, these are meaningful enough, and the sweeping statement that "[t]his is as close to hell as it

gets" gives the reader an acute sense of how unspeakably heart-rending the site must have been in reality (291). Despite the fact that Hoffman's account of Romania is populated by some friendly, helpful and quick-witted Romanians, whom she has befriended along the way, the overall impression of the place remains dark and hostile, dominated by the tragic sights of political and social turmoil, and permeated with a sense of profound human misfortune.

While the image of Bulgaria, despite the country's dismal economic conditions; "a spectacle of pure nothingness" (310), is altogether more positive than that of Romania,[138] neither of the countries seems to fit Hoffman's "idealized landscape of the mind." Although the traveler is always on the lookout for distinctly Eastern European stories—the narratives of developing one's political consciousness vis-á-vis the regime—and she does find them both in Romania and Bulgaria, the imaginary realm which she evokes at the beginning of the book seems to be reserved for Poland, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, with strong emphasis on the first nation. At the same time, "the new Eastern Europe," which features in the title of Hoffman's work and which alludes to Western conceptualization of the region in terms of a homogenous bloc, proves to be an arbitrary category which, as the traveler moves southward, turns less and less capable of accommodating not only the distinct experience of communism but also different paths of development taken by the former People's Republics of Bulgaria and Romania. From the perspective of imagology, Hoffman's study is fascinating as far as the process of constructing otherness is concerned. The author at once shuns and invokes national stereotypes, frankly admitting that "[w]e need a tint of difference, of contrast, for perception to arise" (169). Importantly, some of this stereotyped difference is perceived as worth preserving. Speaking of her native Cracow,

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[138] Interestingly, Hoffman seems to follow something of an imagological pattern, which I have also identified in Updike's treatment of Sofia and, much earlier, in John Reed's travel account of Bulgaria and Romania.

Hoffman admits that she does not want "the changes to violate the Cracow that was so changeless during the last few decades (…). There's an incipient regret I sense in myself (…) for the Poland that is about to pass; for that familiar, reduced reality, for the safety of very slow time" (26). Notably, Hoffman's American perspective is mitigated by her Polish origins. Being Polish, and thus Eastern European is, at least to some extent, responsible for her determination *not* to fall for simple categories, and her desire to present as large a picture as possible. In this sense, *Exit into History* is a mosaic narrative which gives voice to people from different social strata: dissidents and communists; city dwellers and people living in the countryside. Clearly, this is not the kind of Eastern European narrative that we have seen in Updike's, Oates's and Roth's works, where the microcosm of the capital city encapsulated the nature of the nation in question. Moreover, Hoffman's work is distinguished by the fact that she foregrounds Eastern European women: dissidents, politicians, mothers, daughters, and victims of the system. In doing so, she challenges the standard vision of Eastern European politics as the domain of men, with women hovering somewhere in the background as silent witnesses to national dramas and revolutions.

At the beginning of this section, I argued that Hoffman's work displays certain liminal attributes. I wish to add one more, and I believe, important point to this assessment. Eastern Europe portrayed by the author is liminal also because it carries a generative potential for the West. As Hoffman says at the end of her narrative, for decades Eastern Europe had been Western other: "a screen for our projections" (362). However, in the post-1989 context the challenge is to look into the Eastern European mirror to see Western "self-reflection," rather than a distorted image of the other: "Therefore, they challenge us, indirectly, to think afresh about what our world is and what we would like to make of it; what is worthwhile in it and what reprehensible; what

we would advise people we feel friendly toward to take on, and what to discard" (362). This is still a very West-centric approach, but one that, to some extent, challenges the divisive us/them narrative, foregrounding the need to replace Western monolog with East-West dialog.

Earlier in this chapter, I observed that Hoffman's work provides a literary bridge which takes me from the American images of communist Eastern Europe to the post-1989 representations of the area. Furthermore, *Exit into History* ushers the new American traveler, who will be the focus of the rest of this chapter. On coming to Prague, Hoffman noted that the city was "mobbed, mostly with young people ambling with their knapsacks and guitars (…). This summer of 1990 Czechomania, or Czech chic has overtaken the youth international" (108). Arthur Phillips's debut novel *Prague* (2002) clearly alludes to this Western fascination with the country of the Velvet Revolution. In spite of its title, *Prague* takes place in Budapest which is, however, regarded as a less hip substitute for the Czech capital: "Fifteen years from now people will talk about all the amazing American artists and thinkers who lived in Prague in the 1990s. That's where real life is going on right now, not here," assures the novel's main character, John Price (14). In a similar vein, Vladimir Girshkin, the protagonist of Gary Shteyngart's *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002), leaves New York for Prava, an imaginary post-communist city which, though clearly modeled on Prague, this "Paris of the 1990s" with its "sea of spires" and "Tavlata River," is in fact a generic Eastern European city teeming with the Russian mafia on the one hand, and throngs of North American youth, on the other.[139] According to Eliot Borenstein, both novels fall under

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[139] Tellingly, Prava is situated in the Republic of Stolovaya, which in English stands for "cafeteria." It is noteworthy that Shteyngart's strategy is not new—in the 1980s British writer Malcolm Bradbury created an imaginary Eastern European country called Slaka, which is the setting of two books: *Rates of Exchange* (1983) and *Why Come to Slaka?* (1986).

the category of the so-called "post-Communist safari novels;"[140] that is literary outcomes of the transatlantic journeys made by "prematurely world-weary young men and women who followed the lure of easy money, cheap alcohol, and even cheaper sex to the geopolitical discount bins of the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc" (33). Farewell to pre-1989 intellectual kind of travel, welcome to the Western-style conquest of the "Wild East"—the U.S. "last frontier."[141]

Indeed, Phillips's *Prague* features one such young venture capitalist, who, together with a team of like-minded Westerners, makes a fortune in Budapest, taking advantage of the country's transition from the rickety structures of central planning to the rough waters of free-market competition. Cleveland-born Charles/Károly Gábor not only has the necessary credentials to help the Hungarians navigate through the new economic reality (American, self-confident and working in an office "that was larger and more luxurious" than the U.S. ambassador's), but he is also half-Hungarian—the only child of immigrants who escaped the country in 1956 (45). Moreover, unlike his fellow expatriates, Charles speaks fluent Hungarian. This rare skill helps him to duly impress and charm Imre Horváth, the owner of the oldest Hungarian printing press, looking for an injection of Western capital to restore the enterprise to its former role as the cultural heritage of Hungary. Posing as a true Hungarian patriot with the benefit of Midwestern upbringing and solid business know-how, Gábor manages to convince Horváth that his real mission in Budapest is to preserve the country's cultural legacy and thus secure himself a contract which gives him almost fifty percent of shares in the enterprise. When the Hungarian suffers a massive stroke, Gábor becomes a *de facto* owner of the Horváth Kiadó—an opportunity which he uses to sell the press to "the

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[140] The rubric includes also Jonathan Franzen's *The Corrections* (2001), Jonathan Safran Foer's *Everything is Illuminated* (2002), Paul Greenberg's *Leaving Katya* (2002), and John Beckman's *The Winter Zoo* (2002), which I briefly comment upon in this chapter.

[141] The term features in the title of the anthology of short stories edited by Boris Fishman: *Wild East: Stories from the Last Frontier* (2003).

Multinational Median Corporation, where it would quickly be broken down into its irreducible components" (325). So much for the East-West collaboration in restoring the "memory of the people."

In light of Gabór's ruthless exploits, Eastern Europe is thus portrayed as a sentimental and slightly naïve female, passively awaiting rescue from a much stronger and more experienced Western male. As Josep M. Armengol-Carrera argues, Charles Gabór emerges as "the archetypal Orientalist, the one who asserts his superior Western masculinity by feminizing and conquering the inferior East" (119). The language used by male Westerners to describe the Eastern other seems to confirm this line of thinking. A *Times* reporter advises John Price to "[g]rab this nation. Shake it. Look at it from every goddam angle," because "[p]eople look to us (…) to make sense of a senseless world" (236). Lost in transition, the Hungarian female needs the Western man to show her the way, to teach her the rules of the game, yet since he has no time for that (the rest of the Wild East still awaits him), he must master her instead, as Charles does with Imre's family firm. This triumphant Orientalist narrative is, however, complicated by the fact that most expats portrayed by Phillips are hardly the pragmatic "Cold-War warriors" (Armengol-Carrera) that Charles is. If Hungarians are indeed lost in transition, then young Americans swarming the clubs of Budapest and getting drunk on Unicum are the new "lost generation" (41). However, unlike their famous predecessors, their expat experience does not fuel great artistic projects, but only serves to exacerbate their weaknesses and lack of purpose. By traveling to post-communist Eastern Europe,[142] they postpone the inevitable moment of growing up, immersing themselves instead in a limbo-world of idle jobs, incessant parties, and casual sex. Gliding on the surface of Hungarian life, they spend time in their own company, picking up only a

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[142] Phillips keeps using more "politically correct" *Central Europe*.

scrap of Hungarian necessary to buy a drink in one of the clubs, or the famous Gerbeaud Café, whose nineteenth-century décor meets their notion of what the old continent should be like. Budapest, and by extension Eastern Europe, for the city may as well be Prague or Cracow, becomes for them a storehouse of exotic Old-World stories, which they indulge in from the pleasant perspective of a bar stool.

The champion of Eastern European sentimentality is Mark Payton, a Canadian PhD in Cultural Studies and a self-proclaimed scholar in "the history of nostalgia" (7). Mark comes to Budapest to conduct research for a popular book version of his dissertation, but the city as such is of no interest to him. However, he is fascinated by Budapest's generic Old-World charm, embodied in the historic substance of the city's urban landscape. In contrast to his native Toronto, Budapest offers an illusion of reconciling Mark's longing for the past with the necessity of living an ordinary, "modern" life. Yet after several months spent at trying to capture and *keep* the moment in which past and present blend seamlessly, the futility of the project finally dawns on him. Burdened by his inability to adapt to the present as well as an unrequited homosexual crush on his heterosexual friend John Price, Mark goes back to Toronto, holding on to the thought that "[p]erhaps time rushed by less painfully in a place that didn't look old, that had no history" (261). Once there, he submits to psychiatric treatment aimed at alleviating the emotional breakdown that his stay in Budapest has triggered.

John's failure to notice Mark's existential crisis is symptomatic not only of his attitude to his fellow expats but also the Hungarians he befriends. Refusing to see things for what they are, John makes up stories which mold the reality to match his expectations and needs. Thus, he tracks his brother down in Eastern Europe to arrange a fraternal reunion, despite the fact that Scott loathes him, and envisages a romantic

relationship with Emily Oliver, even though the girl is blatantly uninterested in him. John's desire for a better, more romantic reality finds vent in his friendship with a seventy-year-old piano player known as Nádja. With her never-ending repertoire of Old-World stories about love and treason in the midst of war, the woman comes to embody the essence of Central Europe at its most glamorous and unattainable. Rather than discover Budapest himself, John relies on Nádja to fuel his imagination with her improbable narratives, which, momentarily, endow his life with romance and mystery. When Nádja unexpectedly dies, he visits her apartment hoping to encounter there "a treasury of her amazing life so beautifully, so fully lived" (328). What he finds instead is a sad and impoverished place. As much as he is saddened by the loss of Nádja, John grieves losing the Old-World fantasy that she has represented for him. Like Mark, he thrives on nostalgia and the foreign other provides him with a picturesque backdrop to do so.

John yearns for the world from Nádja's stories precisely because it is unattainable. He indulges in fantasies of romantic love between himself and the twenty-four-year-old Nádja "in the enforced darkness of a wartime blackout," with tanks rolling down the streets and bombs exploding (338). While in his imagination he is eager to face the enemy and fight for his lover, authentic if much less spectacular bravery of Imre Horváth embarrasses him. Turning envy into scorn, he convinces himself that the printer is just a pompous old man, even though he cannot help but secretly admire his resilience and determination in the face of historic upheavals. John is clearly burdened by Eastern Europe's "superiority in suffering," a Western complex which I have also detected in Henry Bech's stories. Driven by a desire to debunk this image, he helps Charles to outsmart Horváth the "Western way," failing to see, or rather choosing not to, the far-reaching consequences of his actions.

Prague reiterates the trope of allochronicity;[143] Eastern Europe exists in a different dimension of time, hovering between past and present. Yet it is not just the recent communist legacy that defines Budapest. Equally significant is the historical record of struggle and oppression, embodied in the city's time-ravaged architecture and the "Eastern European stories" weaved by Nádja and Imre. At the same time, there is also a different kind of liminality involved; one that is closely related to Eastern Europe's post-1989 economic transformation. For Charles Gábor and other venture capitalists portrayed in the novel, Hungary's transition from communism to capitalism has created a liminal space of possibilities, a condition which, by being economically and legally ambiguous, permits them to reap profit quickly and easily. In this sense, the Old-World Eastern Europe turns into the New World of opportunities or the West's last frontier inviting a new kind of Orientalism expressed through financial conquest.[144]

While discussing John Updike's, Joyce Carol Oates's, and Philip Roth's engagement with Eastern Europe, I have pointed out to the realm's transformative potential. It is in Eastern Europe that the characters' deepest fears and desires come to the fore. Although their journeys are not *a priori* aimed at self-discovery, the encounter with the foreign other often triggers inner change or at least self-reflection. Looking into the Eastern European mirror, the American characters depicted by these authors ponder over their Jewish heritage, their American identity, and the relationship between art and

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[143] I have borrowed this term from Andaluna Borcila's appraisal of American representations of post-communist Eastern Europe.

[144] I concur with Armengol-Carrera's contention that Phillips ultimately challenges the Orientalist narrative embodied by Charles Gábor. The scholar traces the novel's subversive potential to the alternative ending conjured by John Price, in which Charles's betrayal of his cultural heritage is avenged by Imre's secretary Krisztina, who shoots the American to death. For me, however, it lies in the retrospective section of the book which recounts the history of the Horvath Press since its establishment at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Importantly, the saga does not serve to whitewash the Press and make it into a model example of Eastern European courage. Instead, it reflects the upheavals in the country's history, involving divided loyalties, political turn-coating, and extreme nationalism. It is in this sense that Horvath Kiadó emerges as the memory of Hungarian people. Moreover, Imre Horvath's life is hardly flawless. As Eliot Borenstein points out "Phillips grants Imre Horvath his share of moral authority for his role in the cultural opposition, but at the same time refuses to make him a dissident hero" (36). In doing so, he blurs the clear-cut division into Eastern European innocence and Western cynicism.

politics. In *Prague*, self-discovery is not framed by these grand questions but has a much more individualized character. Therefore, in Budapest John Price loses his prized virginity; Emily Oliver discovers that she is gay, while Mark Payton undergoes a nervous breakdown. The same is true also for John Beckman's novel *The Winter Zoo* (2002), where boundaries are crossed and inhibitions lost even more vigorously than in *Prague*.

Gurney, the novel's main character, is a twenty-one-year old "Iowa incarnate" (Borenstein 35), whose reason for coming to Eastern Europe has nothing to do with either work or tourism. For Gurney, Cracow could be anywhere in the world, but this is where his cousin Jane is currently living and where he comes to escape the burden of responsibility for his new-born American daughter. Accordingly, he has no interest in getting to know the city and spends most of his time in an apartment conveniently located at the very center of Cracow's universe—the Old Town. The apartment belongs to Jane's friends, Grażyna Zamoyska and her teenage daughter Wanda. Grażyna is the ex-wife of Zbigniew, an aristocrat and a hardline communist in one, who has been recently deposed from his post at a Cracow university and who is now taking advantage of Poland's transition into market economy by becoming one of the chief investors in "Kasino Kraków." To complicate things even further, Zbigniew used to have a love affair with Jackie, Gurney's new girlfriend, but is now secretly involved with Gurney's cousin Jane. In turn, Jane and Gurney's relationship, which has always been fraught with ambiguity, turns incestuous in Cracow.

In *The Winter Zoo*, Cracow is reduced to the market square and the Jewish district of Kazimierz, where Dick Chesnutt, another American expat and Jane's ex-lover, lived before he was brutally murdered by Zbigniew. Only once does Gurney abandon the safe microcosm of Cracow to make the customary tour of Auschwitz,

which, however, leaves him unimpressed.[145] Although, as Adam Goodheart observed in his review of the novel, "Beckman is not one to linger over details of architecture or history" (2), the Holocaust continues to cast shadow on the city. "Kraków's black smog cover was filled with the restless spirit of Auschwitz," says that narrator, but the place has no real significance, no meaning for the characters of the novel.[146] In contradistinction to "My Warszawa: 1980," where the memory of the Shoah is the axis of the story and the driving force behind Judith Horne's quest for self-definition, in *The Winter Zoo* Auschwitz's proximity only adds to the stale and sinister atmosphere of the city. Beckman's Cracow is also a far cry from the charming and magical Old-World locale depicted by Eva Hoffman in *Exit into History*. In fact, with its smog-filled air, crooked buildings resembling "buckling teeth," and a "creepy cathedral," Cracow would make a perfect setting for some of the darkest fairy tales written by the brothers Grimm (18-19). Interestingly, the division into good and bad characters has little to do with nationality. While it is true that the most brutal deeds are committed by Zamoyski, who murders Dick Chesnutt and tries to do the same to Gurney, his actions are masterminded by Jane; "a sexual predator for whom Poland is the ultimate free market" (Goodheart 2). In this Wild East, rules of behavior are as scarce as the norms governing the new economy, and the characters immersed in the "expat bubble" (Borenstein 35) take advantage of this moral limbo with gusto. Throughout the novel, "what happens in Cracow, stays in Cracow" seems to be the unspoken rule of Poles and Westerners alike. However, only toward the end of the book does the dictum reach truly Dionysian proportions. Using a small fortune earned by Jackie at the casino, Gurney stages an international "open house" orgy, complete with sumptuous food, drink, and a fair

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[145] Later in the novel, Gurney ventures also to Ojców Valley to visit "the Bluebeard's Castle"—Zbigniew's solitary cottage where he has buried Dick Chesnutt's body.
[146] In the novel, a word of caution belongs to Grażyna, who deplores her daughter's casual, irreverent attitude to Jewish-Polish history.

amount of drugs. Although the party is Western in scale, it does carry some disturbingly Eastern European overtones: "In mockery of the Nazi delousing chambers, (…) these foreigners would lovingly bathe each other's bodies, of course not preparing each other for death, but preparing for absolute nudity, for sacrifice of privacy on the altar of delight!" (232). In this controversial reversal of Eastern European history, all national divisions come undone, as Poles and foreigners alike engage in a transnational "Holocaust of pleasure" (325). If the boundaries crumble, then so do the taboos.

Not until he has crossed the ultimate boundary and had sex with a man can Gurney move on. In the last pages of the novel, he leaves Cracow to go back to the States and, presumably, resume a normal life with his family; his "rite of passage" finally completed. Eventually, it seems, there might be a happy ending to this dark Polish fairy tale, however, it can only happen in the West, for Eastern Europe functions merely as a laboratory of Gurney's youthful excesses, and a liminal phase in his path toward maturity.

The imaginary Prava depicted by Gary Shteyngart in *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002) holds a similar place in Vladimir Girshkin's life story. However, unlike Gurney Vladimir is equipped with the hyphenated perspective of an immigrant; a view which he shares with his literary creator, who was born in Leningrad but grew up in the United States of America. Although Vladimir perceives his Russian roots as an unwanted burden preventing him from being if not American, than at least an "alpha immigrant," they turn out to be crucial in his conquest of expat Prava. At the same time, his insight knowledge of the two worlds allows him to both challenge and perpetuate (to his advantage) the national stereotypes flourishing on both sides of an ever-present East-West divide. In what follows I wish to briefly address these mutual representations.

As a person who has always felt like an outsider in the U.S., Vladimir is able to see through Western fascination with Eastern Europe as embodied by the Prava expat community. Young Americans populating Prava's cafés and discos are veritable heirs to the Western spectacular image of Eastern Europe under Soviet occupation. Driven by Milan Kundera's novels, they have come to Prava to search for inspiration while at the same time looking for a necessary distance, for, after all, "[t]he whole point of coming to the Old World is to chuck the baggage of the new" (211). One such (stereo)typical expat is Perry Cohen, a frustrated budding Hemingway with father issues, for whom, like for "hundreds of unhappy Midwestern young men and women" Prava becomes a "redemptive" land, providing a temporary respite from their mediocre existence (207). According to Vladimir, there was one thing that distinguished Cohen and his ilk from the hyphenated Americans like himself; they were all "entitled to the luxury of being second-rate," while Vladimir "had to perform some grand gesture—conduct the Bolshoi, write a novel, launch a pyramid scheme—to gain a modicum of acceptance" (214). Ironically, although Vladimir's life purpose in the States was to become as American as possible ("Assimilate or leave, those were his options"), in Prava he must exoticize himself to earn the respect and admiration of the expat community (83). At the same time, he uses his Russian credentials to ingratiate himself with Soviet *mafiya*, which is wielding control over post-communist Prava. In a comic variation on the conquest pattern explored in Phillips's novel, Shteyngart makes Vladimir shamelessly exploit the expat crowd with the help of the mighty gangsters. Taking advantage of their penchant for arts, cheap entertainment and easy money, he devises a Ponzi scheme involving a "lit mag," a nightclub (called the Metamorphosis Lounge "in deference to Kafka and his grip on the expatriate imagination"), and a fake computer company (358).

Thus, this time it is the East that conquests the West, albeit using the latter's capitalist methods provided by Vladimir, the Russian-American trickster.

The novel's subversive potential lies in a comic if merciless exploitation of clichéd national images. Indeed, Shteyngart does not spare anyone. Young Westerners portrayed in the novel are doltish, shallow, and self-centered. In theory, they yearn for the cultural other, but in practice they spend most of their time enclosed in their all-American enclaves. They accept Vladimir because he encapsulates the right balance between familiar American qualities and Eastern European exoticism; "[h]istorically, a little dangerous, but, for the most part, nicely tamed by Coca-Cola, blue light specials, and the prospect of a quick pee during commercial breaks" (389). As for the East, it is incarnated by the Soviet Mafiosi who, though mostly ruthless and primitive, can also be warm-hearted and affectionate in their own ways, evoking the popular imageme of the expansive and contradictory Russian soul battered by history. Where does this leave Eastern Europe? Dominated by Soviet gangsters on the one hand, and flooded by American expats on the other, post-communist Prava is a city which has become a battle ground for influence. In Nataša Kovačević's words, Prava "emerges as both a Utopian spectacle for privileged consumption and an Orientalized dystopia of Eastern European violence and economic chaos" (146). As both parties exploit the liminal situation of transition, this archetypal post-1989 Eastern European locale oscillates between Western-style capitalism and Soviet brand of social control, unable either to leave the past behind or move toward the future. Accordingly, the Stolovan society AD 1993 is represented through a conflict between a bunch of communist *babushkas* who keep protecting the last remnant of the regime—an enormous foot which used to belong to a giant Stalin figure—and two young Stolovans who, with the help of Vladimir's liberal-minded American girlfriend Morgan, stock up on explosives to blow out the foot and in

doing so take a final if belated revenge on the oppressive regime, literally clearing the path to a bright westernized future. Importantly, Vladimir identifies himself with the two dissidents even though, as Morgan dutifully points out, "[his] people invaded the country in 1969" (382). For Vladimir, however, the similarity lies in their common upbringing and its effect on who they are in the eyes of (Western) others:

> Do you know how similar we are, the three of us? Why, we're the same proto-Soviet model. We're like human Ladas or Trabants. We're ruined, folks. You can blow up all the Feet in the world, you can rant and rave through the Old Town Square, you can emigrate to sunny Brisbane or Chicago's Gold Coast, but if you grew up under that system, that precious gray planet of our fathers and forefathers, you're marked for life (383).

By conflating his own Soviet childhood with Tomas and Alpha's lives in the shadow of communism, Vladimir totalizes Eastern European experience, turning it into a humiliating badge of inferiority.[147] Ultimately, Eastern Europe (with or without the Soviet Union) remains a helplessly "beta country," a monolithic construct evoked by Eva Hoffman in *Exit into History* as the dominant Western hetero-image of the region. The only way out of this stereotype is to put it to one's own advantage like Vladimir, or his fellow schemer František, an ex-apparatchik who would use his post as journalist in a communist newspaper to travel abroad and profit from Western tamizdat mentality,[148]

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[147] At the same time, it must be noted that Vladimir emphasizes his Eastern European sense of inferiority with the aim impressing Morgan and drawing a distinction between his "serious" suffering and her trivial American frustrations. In doing so, he conveniently turns Western tamizdat narrative to his own advantage. The question of national stereotypes is further problematized by Vladimir's ambivalent attitude to Americans. As mentioned before, he uses "his appraising outsider's eye" (Kakutani n. pag.) to mock the American crowd, which seems to him glib and self-absorbed in comparison (after all, Vladimir is said to carry a double burden of history as he is not only Russian but also Jewish) yet he yearns for the kind of happy-go-lucky Americanness which he associates with Morgan. He thinks of her as a perfect specimen of Midwestern straightforwardness and mental sanity, and when she fails to conform to this stereotype, he feels mad and disappointed. Eventually, Vladimir's national determinism is punished in a way which is as cruel as it is ironic: he is beaten up by Stolovan skinheads who take him for …an Arab.

[148] "After the Soviet invasion there was no shortage of sympathy for 'a young, oppressed Stolovan, let out for a glimpse of freedom, only to be corralled back into his Stalinist pen'" (330).

and who is now making money on Prava's transition to capitalism. In this light, Vladimir's efforts to westernize the mafia, i.e. turn them into American-style businessmen, are not aimed at rehabilitating their degenerate ways, but rather teaching them how *not* to appear Eastern European and thus keep up the pretence of "normalcy." Despite shedding Soviet kitsch, as evidenced in their appearance and immediate environment, and putting on Western garb provided by Vladimir, the Prava Mafiosi adhere to good old methods of violence and terror, the only business strategy they import from the West being a devious pyramid scheme. In other words, Western capitalism is at once emulated and subverted by the East. In this sense, Shteyngart recycles the leitmotif of a funhouse mirror, as post-communist Eastern Europe keeps functioning as a distorted image of the West. However, instead of casting Western capitalism as the only viable solution to Eastern European socio-economic malaise, it adverts to the system's own afflictions. Thinking in Saidian terms, Western self-image reflected in the post-communist mirror is hardly consolidated and strengthened in comparison with its Eastern European imitation—though it is still undeniably appealing and worthy of emulation, it also comes off as visibly flawed.[149]

In a broader perspective, Shteyngart's Prava might be read as an inflated meta-image of Eastern Europe in post-communist flux, striving to come to terms with the legacy of communism and the dangers of transition into capitalist future, so far unable to find its own, "third" path capable of accommodating the two. Simultaneously, the novel exposes some crude national stereotypes which have accrued around the mental categories of East and West, and which keep informing mutual relations, even though the Iron Curtain is no longer preventing a more nuanced vision of both worlds. As for Vladimir, at the end of the novel we learn that he has chosen America over exotic

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[149] To find out about the symbolic significance of the Soviet mafia within post-communist dynamics of Prava, please see Nataša Kovačević's incisive discussion of the novel in *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization* (2008).

Prava; he now leads a tranquil suburban life at Morgan's side, working as an accountant in her father's company. However, "at least once a week" Vladimir "locks his office door, closes his eyes, and dreams of…A scheme! A provocation Pyramids! Turbo Props! The Frankfurt exchange! The old Girshkin something for nothing!" (451). Five years later, in Vladimir's seemingly-assimilated mind, Eastern Europe remains the mythical land of his youthful excesses, or, to borrow Eva Hoffman's words, "a Rorschach test" for his transgressive desires (*Exit* xii).

While I do not wish to argue that the above works are representative of American visions of Eastern Europe in the post-communist era, I believe that they allow the reader to appreciate how American imaginative geographies of the area have been affected by the lifting of the Iron Curtain and the resultant freedom of movement. Particularly the "expat safari novels" discussed in this chapter signalize not only a new kind of traveler but also a shift of perspective. Eastern Europe as filtered through the eyes of young American expats is no longer framed by the intellectual questions which preoccupied the earlier visitors to the region, but it still reverberates with the characters' anxieties and dramas. Notwithstanding, the novels reiterate the trope of a liminal space, as Eastern Europe is imagined as existing in a different time and space, where ordinary rules do not apply and one's behavior is not gauged by the same standards as in the West. At the same time, the singular situation of transition adds another dimension to Eastern Europe's liminal condition. The socio-economic limbo produced by the collapse of communism and the movement toward market economy invites Western financial conquest, turning this new Eastern Europe into an ultimate frontier for money savvy "cowboys" (Armengol-Carrera) like Charles Gábor from Phillips's *Prague*.

Conclusions

In the early stages of working on this dissertation, I ordered a series of publications exploring liminality in literary criticism, which, as mentioned in the introduction, proved to be crucial for my analysis of liminal dynamics in American images of Eastern Europe during the Cold War. Though rich in content, the books are modest in appearance, with plain gray covers and simple black lettering. When I went to pick them up at the university library, the librarian looked at them and said: "Oh, these are pretty ugly; they look like something from Eastern Europe, straight from the Soviet times." Needless to say that she had no idea about my research project. I laughed, picked up my "Eastern European" volumes and went away. Later this year, I traveled to my *alma mater* in Cracow to carry out a research stay. Before I buried myself in volumes on the history, geography and culture of the region, I went to see my Polish host who asked me to tell him about my project in detail. The moment I uttered the name "Europa Wschodnia" ("Eastern Europe") he suggested using more neutral term "Europa Środkowo-Wschodnia" which in English stands for "East-Central Europe." It did not come as a surprise. Whenever I speak about Poland as part of Europe, I prefer to use the latter term, avoiding the marked category of Eastern Europe.

Although the above situations have achieved the status of my personal "PhD anecdotes" by now, at the time they helped to consolidate my conviction that "Eastern Europe" is a storehouse of associations and a handy label for making sweeping generalizations. The review of research which I conducted and conveyed in the second chapter confirmed my premonition that Eastern Europe is all of the above and much more and that as an idea it is much older than I imagined. Obviously, Eastern Europe is no exception but rather part of a long tradition of imagining foreignness by combining

facts with presuppositions and setting "them" against "us." In this dissertation, I have taken advantage of the insights and findings of some of the most renowned "interdisciplinary imagologists." Establishing a trans-historical dialog with Larry Wolff's study on how Eastern Europe was invented in the cultural imaginary of the Age of Reason, I employed Edward Said's notion of "imaginative geographies" to explore Eastern Europe's liminal indeterminacy in the works of American Cold-War travelers. My decision to focus on three major American literary voices has had a bearing on the implications and results which this dissertation offers. My purpose has not been to offer a thorough vision of the American cultural imaginary of Eastern Europe under communism, but rather to analyze a fragment of a bigger picture. Therefore, I cannot lay claim to offering a comprehensive imagological study—my sources are limited and carefully selected to reflect specific Western cultural/intellectual interest in the area. Nevertheless, I find this fragment to be a meaningful and fascinating source of imagological knowledge, clad in exceptional and distinct writing of, arguably, some of the greatest writers of post-war America. As much as I have sought to re-construct their literary hetero-images of communist Eastern Europe, this project has also allowed me to unveil complex dynamics between selfhood and otherness which these works convey. In this sense, each experience of Eastern Europe analyzed in this dissertation is distinct and fueled by the profiles, identities and interests of the characters and their creators. At the same time, however, I have found out that they share much common ground. Transatlantic, cross-cultural journeys frame and determine these encounters, infusing them with potentiality and expectancy. Yet this liminal structurelessness, reinforced by the privileged status of the American characters as temporary visitors from "a better world," is offset by disturbing sociopolitical realities and the dark memory of the region's past. Among others, this duality comes to the fore in Oates's "Ich Bin Ein

Berliner," in which the nameless narrator gradually loses his composure under the uncanny influence of the Wall, or John Updike's "Bech in Rumania" where Henry Bech's playfulness and ironic distance conceal his dread of Romanian anti-Semitism. Moreover, the "goodwill" cultural exchanges/missions which the authors map reveal cultural differences which, in turn, reflect global grids of power and geopolitical maps of dominance. Thus, the tragic figure of the Prague dissident Soska is a foil for the safe and well-off American professor David Kepesh in Roth's *Professor of Desire*; in "Rich in Russia" Soviet-American rivalry underpins Henry Bech's ostentatiously consumerist performance in Moscow, while Marianne Beecher's manner toward Hungarians is marked by an acute sense of Western superiority. In this sense, Eastern Europe emerges as a mirror in which the West sees its mighty silhouette refracted through communist drabness. On the other hand, however, it also operates as a "world beyond the looking glass" where new scenarios are enacted; boundaries crossed, and (self) discoveries made. Suffice it to recall Judith Horne's painful confrontation with her Jewish patrimony in the midst of communist Warsaw, or Nathan Zuckerman's striking realization that Prague is the imaginary Jewish city of his childhood, to see that ethnic identity and cultural heritage often drive these formative experiences, functioning as the linkage connecting the American characters to Eastern Europe but also complicating these East-West encounters—as happens with Henry Bech whose subliminal fear of the Holocaust converts Prague into a site of almost physical terror. The detailed analysis of the selected American works has confirmed my initial proposition that in the Western intellectual imaginary (communist) Eastern Europe oscillated between several conflicting representations, with certain countries coming to the fore of American attention while others remaining at the periphery. This is especially true in the case of Czech dissident culture in the aftermath of the Prague Spring, as evidenced in Updike's

"Bech in Czech," and, most of all, in Roth's *The Prague Orgy*. Regarding the Soviet Union's position on these imaginative maps, I have demonstrated that it is characterized by a fascinating ambivalence. In particular, John Updike invested the figure of Henry Bech with a paradoxical emotional baggage combining tender feelings for timeless "Mother Russia" with Cold-War hostility to America's major adversary—the Soviet Union. In a similar vein, Antonia Haas from Oates's "Détente" projects her preconceived notions of Russian otherness on the Soviet writer Vassily Zurov, fashioning him into an exoticized object of desire; a perturbed rebel figure straight from the pages of Dostoyevsky's novels. In light of chapter 2 and particularly my imagological review, these mental mappings mirror shifting political relations between the two countries as well as earlier cultural representations shaped by media and literature. Russia/Soviet Union is thus always present in the analyzed works, either explicitly as America's counterpart/adversary ("Rich in Russia," "Détente") or the ominous shadow looming large over the "captive nations" of Eastern Europe ("Bech in Czech," *The Professor of Desire*, and *The Prague Orgy*).

Yet, while the analyzed works draw from the rich cultural repository of existing collective preconceptions of alterity, my discussion has also unveiled how exploring and reporting Eastern European otherness is also a form of inner voyaging displaying tensions within the self, which frequently become exacerbated through interactions with the unfamiliar. In a broader perspective, my analysis has also thrown some light on how these inward-looking narratives reflect authorial interests and the significance they acquire in the context of their oeuvres. In other words, in Updike's, Oates's and Roth's imaginative reworkings of their actual voyages, Eastern Europe is fashioned out of the "travel material" which these journeys rendered and the themes and questions proper to the authors' respective fictions. Thus, Henry Bech emerges as a counterweight to

Updike's most famous all-American protagonist, Rabbit Angstrom, and a fictional vehicle for exploring alternative scenarios; he is Updike's fictional response to the question what it means to be a Jewish-American novelist, while his exploits in the European East reveal the insecurities which come with being a writer (particularly when he compares himself with the dissident authors of Prague). Simultaneously, his State Department stint behind the Iron Curtain in a sense complements Rabbit's domestic travails against the backdrop of Cold-War America, providing insights into the cultural side of the struggle, and sharing a glimpse of "how the other half lives."[150] On a personal level, Updike's own sojourn in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe consolidated his pro-American stance and his attitude toward politically-oriented literature, which I alluded to in my analysis of Henry Bech stories and which is explored in detail in D. Quentin Miller's informed study, *John Updike and the Cold War: Drawing the Iron Curtain* (2001).

As one moves from Updike's vision of the European East to Joyce Carol Oates's portrayal of Berlin, Warsaw and Budapest it is possible to appreciate how the novelist's creative sensibility and aesthetics shape Eastern Europe into the site where the characters' subliminal instincts come to the fore and inner conflicts unfold. The psychology of the American travelers is thus the main focus of these stories but the Eastern European surroundings are central to their "emotional undoing." Importantly, the protagonists of "Ich Bin Ein Berliner" and "My Warszawa: 1980" are not driven by voyeuristic curiosity in their exploration of the hostile milieus of Berlin and Warsaw, but yield to the oppressive substance of these cities, which gradually impose themselves on their psyches, exposing cracks and fissures in their hitherto complete American selves and rubbing salt into the invisible wounds. In these stories, the personal and the

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[150] The phrase is the title of Updike's review of Eastern European books collected *in Odd Jobs: Essays and Criticism*. It is also the title of a chapter in D. Quentin Miller's *John Updike and the Cold War: Drawing the Iron Curtain* (2001).

political coalesce to form the disturbing liminal condition of the *unhomely* where the safe universe of the self fractures under the weight of "history's most intricate invasions" (Bhabha, "The World" 141). Writing about Oates's collection, Greg Johnson observed that the "dual focus" of *Last Days* is not an isolated strategy but rather the hallmark of her fiction: "the detailed, compelling presentation of individuals plunged into various kinds of emotional and psychological upheaval, combined with the larger social, political, and philosophical crises for which these individual narratives serve as nightmarish emblems" (*Understanding* 180). In this sense, Eastern Europe inscribes itself into Oates's imaginative microcosm, as it allows her to explore the central concern of her fiction: "the geography of consciousness" (B. Daly 87).

The motif of a transatlantic journey as a form of self-reflection has been most thoroughly explored in my discussion of Philip Roth's engagement with Prague. As chapter 5 has showed, the experience of the Other Europe was a decisive point in Roth's career for a number of reasons. From the start Prague resonated with Roth but also took him in new artistic directions. As coda to *Zuckerman Bound*, *The Prague Orgy* is, as Mark Shechner observed, a perfect punchline to the trilogy and the final bitter-sweet joke that Roth plays on his protagonist. But the novella also stands on its own, not only as "an obscene, elegiac homage to a lost culture" (Brauner 43) but also a singular testimony to the power of literature no matter where it comes from. As Roth's friend Ivan Klíma put it: "Literature doesn't have to scratch around for political realities or even worry about systems that come and go; it can transcend them and still answer questions that the system evokes in people" (Roth, Shop 67). If read together with *The Professor of Desire* and Roth's reflections on the situation of dissident writers, *The Prague Orgy* also speaks about the business of being a writer, evoking questions which despite being embedded in the bygone era of the Cold War, may be still relevant today:

What does it mean to be a writer? Does it imply any social responsibility? What has politics got to do with it? Roth is no moralist and his own answers reflect his independent and nonconformist self, yet all the signs indicate that his experience of Prague was instrumental in arriving at them.

In the introduction, I said that this dissertation is not about Eastern Europe but rather about the shapes it assumes in the writings of selected American writers. This, I hope, has been duly demonstrated by now. However, in addition to being a rich source of hetero-images, these works say quite a lot about the way national stereotypes are constructed and what role they may play in approaching foreign "them," whoever they may be. Particularly Oates's stories, "Détente" and "Old Budapest," question cultural superiority and narrow-mindedness that clichéd forms of thinking conceal, as the protagonists appropriate and fetishize Eastern Europe by extrapolating their cultural fantasies of otherness onto actual people and places. Similarly, Henry Bech's patchy knowledge of Romania determines his schematic impressions and prevents him from adopting a more discerning perspective, whereas Zuckerman's preconceptions about the Prague literary circle are put to the test when he is faced with not-so-tragic dissidents.

While the bulk of this dissertation is concerned with Eastern Europe's position in the American Cold-War imaginary, in coda I have sought to find out how the revolutions of 1989 influenced American literary perceptions of the area, as well as survey some current academic trends in approaching post-communist Eastern Europe. Understandably, much critical discussion on the subject is generated by scholars with intercultural background straddling both "East" and "West." Although now, twenty-five years since Eastern Europe's *annus mirabilis* it would seem that these categories have been rendered moot, they are still alive not only as academic signposts, but also mental tags used to generalize about the various degrees of socioeconomic development and to

evoke Eastern Europe's communist past. Mental mappings which these categories carried have transformed along with the countries which made up the Eastern Europe(s) of this dissertation, but they have not disappeared, as I have demonstrated in the last chapter. In this connection, many scholars acknowledge that one of academia's challenges lies in accounting for these changes through the careful study of the sociopolitical realities which underlie them, while at the same time constructing a meaningful critical vocabulary capable of expressing "the new" without relying too much on "the old," or, alternatively, relegating it to the recesses of history. To this purpose, the "liminal" condition of post-communist Eastern Europe is often explored and interrogated using concepts and instruments derived from postcolonial studies. Another way of broadening critical horizons within post-socialist cultural research consists in examining numerous discourses ranging from traditional genres to other forms of social and cultural expression: monuments, testimonies, personal anecdotes, commemorative celebrations, etc. Particularly the study of post-communist nostalgia, also known as *ostalgia*, in its many variants and forms has been a hot button subject within the academic scholarship on Eastern Europe, to the point that in 2010 Maria Todorova has jokingly compared it to a specter haunting the international academia (Introduction 1).

These current academic trends and ways of approaching the complex landscape of Eastern Europe which still grapples with communist legacies at different levels of social, political and cultural consciousness have direct implications for my own research. In the second section of coda, "New Eastern Europe under American Eyes: Some Imagological Concerns," I have traced the shift in perception which accompanied Eastern European transitions, outlining the profiles of new American explorers of the region together with their post-Cold-War agendas. While Eva Hoffman's "narrative of

return," albeit not entirely free of clichéd thinking, constitutes an attempt to hear, explore and understand the multiple voices of Eastern Europe at the historical threshold between the past and the present, Phillips's, Beckman's and Shteyngart's novels portray characters who travel there either to fulfil their personal ambitions or run away from the burden of themselves. In this they are perhaps not much different from such characters as Henry Bech or Nathan Zuckerman but their post-1989 East-West encounters clearly lack the intensity and vividness present in the works written by Updike, Oates, and Roth. Moreover, they are driven by different sensibilities and agendas. Although these young American travelers have surely read their Kundera, they have not come to Eastern European capitals to explore their cultures—rather they want to soak up what they think is a mythic "cultural atmosphere" of places like Prague or Budapest. It has not been my intention to compare these novels in terms of literary quality or significance with the pre-1989 works of Updike, Oates, and Roth. Instead, I have aimed at tracing an imagological continuum of American representations of communist/post-communist Eastern Europe, pointing to the differences in perceptions and ways of experiencing the area, which are pertinent to the character of the travelers, the nature of their journeys, and the historical moment in which they transpired. Again, liminality proved to be a useful functional category for analyzing Eastern Europe's malleability in the hands of Western spectants, while at the same time accounting for the new kind of handling, legitimized by the "betwixt and between" situation of transition, as the West's "last frontier" waiting to be financially conquered, or a socioeconomic underling which needs to be tutored by its knowledgeable and experienced superior. My discussion ends with the works published in 2002 yet portraying the early 1990s. In 2013 M. Henderson Ellis published *Keeping Bedlam at Bay in the Prague Café*, a debut novel which through its subject matter and setting belongs to the "expat safari novels" written by

Phillips, Beckman, and Shteyngart. Does Ellis's novel signify that Eastern Europe is still capable of stirring American literary imagination? Or maybe it is just an isolated case of Western nostalgia for the lost world? In *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (2006) Andrew Baruch Wachtel observed that following the collapse of communism Eastern European literature lost its status of sociocultural phenomenon and hence its appeal for the West (6). While Wachtel is convinced that "work on the level of that produced in previous decades by writers such as Kundera, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Wisława Szymborska and Danilo Kiš continues to be created in Eastern Europe, even after the end of communism" (1), the cultural interest which, to a large extent, fueled the literary journeys explored in this dissertation belongs to the era that ended once and for all. Therefore, one of the questions which my research project opens up concerns current Western image of Eastern Europe and what lies behind it. This in turn requires unpacking the adjective "Western."[151] Is it possible to speak about an exclusively American vision of today's Eastern Europe as an area with shared experience of communism but very different paths of development? If so, is there enough meaningful literary material or maybe the conceptual lens needs to be adapted to account for a broader "Western" spectant, including, say, the U.K.? Would the conceptual mappings explored in this work still make sense in such a study?

To conclude, while this dissertation stands on its own as an inquiry into the nature of the idea, image, and experience of Eastern Europe as imagined in selected American works, it is also, as any imagological study, an instance of "work in progress" which evokes new questions while always looking back on those which have already been answered.

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[151] While the U.S. has kept its position as (Eastern) Europe's "West," as a Pole I would venture that the U.K. has been removed from this category in light of massive Polish immigration—as Kathleen Starck observed—speaking about binaries gets increasingly awkward since the East resides in the West now.

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