

Between Geopolitics and Geopoetics – “Mitteleuropa” as a Transnational  
Memory Discourse in Austrian and Yugoslav Postwar Literature.

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## ABSTRACT

Between Geopolitics and Geopoetics – “Mitteleuropa” as a Transnational Memory  
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*Between Geopolitics and Geopoetics – “Mitteleuropa” as a Transnational Memory Discourse in Austrian and Yugoslav Postwar Literature* examines how the German idea of Central Europe inspired a new poetics of memory in Austrian and South Slavic literary texts during the Cold War period (1945 – 1989). As early as the 19<sup>th</sup> century, German and Austrian political thinkers (Fürst von Metternich, Friedrich Liszt, Friedrich Naumann) have framed ideas of Germanic cultural and economic eastward expansion under the term *Mitteleuropa*. This was countered by a wave of post-imperial Austrian literature after 1918 that nostalgically evoked what had once been the largest multiethnic and multilingual political entity on the continent as *Mitteleuropa*. Even though these writings offered far from a unifying vision of old Austria, literary scholarship in the 1960s interpreted them as creating a retrospective utopia or “Habsburg myth.” Decades later, a group of Eastern European dissidents resuscitated that same literary idea to attack the Cold War division of Europe. The dialectics inherent in the *Mitteleuropa* debate from the beginning (east versus west, Germans versus Slavs, center versus periphery) have continued to shape postwar public discourses on memory, loss and justice. Challenging both expansionist and nostalgic visions of a larger Europe, my dissertation argues that with the radical geo-political shifts after World War II, an alternate memory discourse of *Mitteleuropa* emerged in the work of writers who questioned previous notions of geographic identity and national allegiance. By looking at the way that iconic writers like

Ingeborg Bachmann, Peter Handke, Danilo Kiš and Dubravka Ugrešić utilize the legacy of Habsburg nostalgia in the postwar period to develop their own poetics of memory, I show how they establish a new form of engaged writing, which transgresses the ideological divide that has defined the continent. I reveal deep ties between the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia and the second Austrian Republic of 1955, dating back to a common imperial past, the persistent ideal of a multiethnic community and an uneasy relationship to dogmatic political ideologies. Both the second Austrian Republic and the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia found themselves in what seemed to be a historical vacuum after the end of the Second World War: Though under completely different political premises, both countries elided uncomfortable aspects of their recent pasts and replaced them with a highly edited version of historical ‘truth.’ In Austria, this meant a self-fashioning as the first victim of Nazi-Germany, and a denial of widespread collaboration in Holocaust atrocities. In the newly founded federative republic of Yugoslavia, Socialist ideology promoted the image of the partisan hero, but kept silent about crimes committed by the ‘liberators’ themselves. While Austria sought to distance itself from postwar Germany through a nostalgic reference to the Habsburg Empire, the Yugoslav Socialists’ official rhetoric of progress, plurality and unity left no room for inconvenient truths that might ignite conflicts between its numerous ethnicities. For lack of a public debate, the role of critical memory in both countries was consequently taken over by postwar authors and artists offering a different ‘engaged’ literature without succumbing to the pitfalls of ideology. Unlike previous interpretations, which focus on the historical ruptures created by Nazi Fascism and the Iron Curtain, my dissertation

shows that Central Europe persists both as a literary network and a cultural community (*Kulturgemeinschaft*) defined by political debate and civic engagement.

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*For my parents, Biba and Ivo.*

## **Preface: *Mittleuropa* as a Transnational Memory Discourse**

We did not ask if he had seen any monsters, for monsters have ceased to be news. There is never any shortage of horrible creatures who prey on human beings, snatch away their food, or devour whole populations; but examples of wise social planning are not so easy to find.

Thomas More, *Utopia*

The spirit of our times is profoundly skeptical of utopias. With its rapid flourishing and spectacular collapse of the two most consequential manifestations of political utopian thought, Nazi fascism and Stalinist communism, the 20<sup>th</sup> century seems to have provided the ultimate admonition against any imaginaries of ideal place and community. The monsters against which utopia always directed its improbable projects of civilization have revealed themselves as having been dormant in their own midst. And yet in spite the end of futurist hopes that Andreas Huyssen has observed in the aftermath of the last of these cataclysmic shifts,<sup>1</sup> the human need for utopian projection has found a new outlet in the obsession with collective pasts. While the memory boom that had started in West Germany in the 1980s with a renewed discussion of the Holocaust gained additional momentum through the reunification that was soon to follow, its ghosts of totalitarian utopia were channeled into a regained European sense of belonging. Germany had fully returned to the European map, as had the east of Europe, which had been obscured from public consciousness through the ideological divide of the Cold War. Now that it was accessible again, this topography, which had been part of the German and Austrian

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<sup>1</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts. Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

spheres of power for centuries, divulged the memories that had been frozen during the decades of Soviet rule. The category of space, so long a taboo in German critical thought due to its connotations with Nazi expansionism became relevant again. It had been prepared by the rediscovery of Eastern Europe through dissident debates in the 1980s, which wanted to restore the forgotten territory east of the Iron Curtain in Western consciousness. These, in turn, coincided with the rediscovery of space as a heuristic concept which promised, just like the memory boom that partially overlapped with it, to overcome the dominance of historicist approaches.<sup>2</sup> Still it took a while for space and memory to be systematically approached together, and in many ways, this has only been happening over the last years.<sup>3</sup>

This dissertation tries to bridge this gap by examining how the German idea of *Mittleuropa* or Central Europe developed into a transnational memory discourse in the aftermath of utopian collapse both in the east and west. Specifically, it looks at how Austrian and Yugoslav literary texts after 1945 address problems of memory through spatial imaginaries. After the disintegration of the Habsburg Empire in 1918, a wave of Austrian literature began to evoke a unifying vision of what had once been the largest

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<sup>2</sup> For some of the crucial contributions to the Spatial Turn, see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), Edward Soja, *Postmodern Geographies: the Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory* (London; New York: Verso, 1989). Both Soja and Harvey draw on the French school of neo-Marxist social geography, most of all Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1984). For the first intersection between space and memory, see Pierre Nora. *Les Lieux de mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984).

<sup>3</sup> In 2003, Andreas Huyssen still remarked on the neglect of memory in recent scholarship on space. The historian Karl Schlögel has contributed to the Spatial Turn and the recuperation of Eastern Europe in Germany and Austria with several publications, but even his wide-reaching case studies mention memory only en passant. See Karl Schlögel, *Die Mitte liegt ostwärts: Europa im Übergang* (Munich: Hanser, 2002); *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit: Über Zivilisationsgeschichte und Geopolitik* (Munich: Hanser, 2003); *Marjampole oder Europas Wiederkehr aus dem Geist der Städte* (Munich: Hanser, 2005); *Grenzland Europa. Unterwegs auf einem neuen Kontinent* (Munich: Hanser, 2013).

multiethnic and multilingual political entity on the continent. In writings that wavered between reverence and sarcasm, nostalgia and melancholy, this mental map was called *Mitteleuropa*. Even though these writings offered far from a unifying vision of old Austria, literary scholarship in the 1960s interpreted them as creating a retrospective utopia or “Habsburg myth.”<sup>4</sup> In the 1980s, a group of Eastern European dissidents – most prominently the Hungarian György Konrád, the expatriate Czech Milan Kundera and the Pole Czeslaw Milosz– unearthed the same literary idea to reclaim their European heritage which had unjustly been swallowed by the specter of Soviet rule. This region, “geographically at the center, culturally in the West and politically in the East,“ had been transformed from Europe’s “cultural home” into uncharted territory, forgotten by the West.<sup>5</sup> In spite of this, Milosz claimed that a common Central European heritage manifested itself through “an awareness of history, both as the past and as the present” in Central European literature.<sup>6</sup> *Mitteleuropa* as a common poetics was thus used to redefine postwar notions of memory, identity and national allegiance. My thesis demonstrates how the inherent dialectics of the *Mitteleuropa* discourse (the center versus the margin, nationalism versus transnationalism, the Germans versus the Slavs) is continued and transformed after two major historical rifts in the spatial configuration of Europe: the destruction wreaked by Nazi Fascism and the Second World War, and the political divide

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<sup>4</sup> Claudio Magris, *Der habsburgische Mythos in der modernen österreichischen Literatur*, trans. Madeleine von Pásztor (Salzburg: Müller, 1966).

<sup>5</sup> Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” trans. Edmund White, *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 31, Number 7, April 26 (1984), 1-14.

<sup>6</sup> Czeslaw Milosz, “Central European Attitudes,” *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, Vol. 5 (1986): 101-108.

of the Cold War. Finally, I examine why *Mittleuropa* as a discourse came to fruition in a region hitherto almost overlooked in this context – the former Yugoslavia.

Both the second Austrian Republic and the Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia found themselves in what seemed to be a historical vacuum after the end of the Second World War: Though under completely different political premises, both countries elided uncomfortable aspects of their recent pasts and replaced them with a highly edited version of historical ‘truth.’ In Austria, this meant a self-fashioning as the first victim of Nazi-Germany, and a denial of widespread collaboration in Holocaust atrocities. In the newly-founded federative republic of Yugoslavia, Socialist ideology promoted the image of the partisan hero, but kept silent about crimes committed by the ‘liberators’ themselves. While Austria sought to distance itself from postwar Germany through a nostalgic reference to the Habsburg Empire, the Yugoslav Socialists’ official rhetoric of progress, plurality and unity left no room for inconvenient truths that might ignite conflicts between its numerous ethnicities. For lack of a public debate, the role of critical memory in both countries was consequently taken over by postwar authors and artists offering a different ‘engaged’ literature without succumbing to the pitfalls of ideology. The comparative analysis is warranted through a shared history and reciprocated discourse in literature: Not only did many Austrian authors express their fascination with the former Empire’s Balkan margins, but the Habsburg rule, along with the colonizing power of German culture had also left a deep impression upon the area that became Yugoslavia in 1945. The questions I am asking are the following: How do these specific literary texts engage in the production and remembering of space? How do individual authors produce

collective identity through topographies of remembrance? And finally, how are elements of utopia both embraced and rejected (turned into dystopia)?

*Mitteleuropa* as a cultural concept, though deeply tied historical period of the Habsburg era, its geography and demographics, is not identical with it, since it comprises different layers of history that go beyond that. And while it has repeatedly taken on the role of “laboratory for the end of the world,” which Karl Kraus had claimed for old Austria, it has functioned as a laboratory for different humanist utopias as well. What my examination of literary texts across geographical and temporal delineations shows is that now as then, Central European writers have conceived of themselves not just as the inhabitants and co-creators of this space, but also its *genius loci*, protectors of a space in the original Roman sense. This does not mean that literary appropriations of Central Europe always have to be viewed as innocent and concerned with the peaceful convivance of all its parts. That such an attachment to space could take either direction can be demonstrated by the disparate visions of the European east in Joseph Roth’s *The Wandering Jews* (1927) and Hans Grimm’s *Volk ohne Raum* (1926), which were published only a year apart. Roth, who had grown disillusioned with a privileged, idealistic conception of *Mitteleuropa* as it was proposed by Stefan Zweig, suggested that the Eastern Jews, not the assimilated Jewish Viennese bourgeoisie (to which Zweig belonged) are the true Central European subjects, because they were the only Habsburg collective that embraced mobility, anationalism, and a multilingual and multicultural hybridity fully. Grimm’s novel, on the other hand, was ideal propaganda fuel for the Nazi colonization of the east, which entailed the displacement, enslavement and murder of its inferior population. Steeped in the frustration of the territorial curtailing of Germany after

the defeat of 1918, it melodramatically showcases the German need for more space through the trials of a young quarry worker who, unable to find work in his hometown emigrates to South Africa, where he learns the lessons of geographical assertion in the Boer war. The German people, it suggests, are withering away in a constricted space and to regain their national health, a geographical expansion is necessary. Colonialism abroad, Grimm seemed to suggest, was a risky business, but the regions bordering with Germany were unused property that just waited to be seized and cultivated. It is through such deliberations that the dangerous notion of the eastern landscape as a vast, empty container was created, which stood in stark contrast to the historical perception of Mitteleuropa as “full,” due to its heterogeneity and cultural complexity.<sup>7</sup>

Whether one sees *Mitteleuropa* as a territory to be used, or as a cultural network and repository of memory that needs to be preserved has been the major schism in the discourse. Henri Lefebvre’s theory of the social production of space seems particularly helpful to explain the historical dimensions of Central European spatiality. Lefebvre, who argued that space was not simply given, but depended on contingent social and political actions, saw space in late modernity as substantially fractured by the power mechanisms of capitalism; this led him to propose a tripartite definition of space: 1) *espace perçu* (perceived space) relating to the material, everyday life, 2) *espace conçu* (conceived space) as planned, theoretical space (of scientists, politicians, geographers) and 3) *espace vécu*, (lived space) as a synthesis of the former two through imagination, particularly the medium of art. While the first depended on “spatial practices” (physical and material

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<sup>7</sup> Ulrike Jureit, *Das Ordnen von Räumen. Territorium und Lebensraum im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2012), 118.

practices in society), the second was tied to “representations of space” (abstract perceptions of space), and to “representational spaces” (imagined space and space as it is experienced via images and symbols).<sup>8</sup> While these categories were not completely isolated from each other, Lefebvre did express the hope that imaginary power behind the “representational spaces,” could vitalize both spatial practices and representations of space to remedy the kind of alienation he had seen through a championing of abstract space. It is in the role as “representational space,” as a contact zone of the physical and the imagined that *Mitteleuropa* is evoked in the writings that I discuss. It is in this form that it has the potential to reflect and affect the tension-filled relationship between time and space that Lefebvre has observed. What he describes as the constant clash of “the absolute primacy of the now-difference” (the way every present moment is perceived as new and fresh) and the “now repetition” (how every experience is perceived as having been there before), is common experience in *Mitteleuropa literature*.<sup>9</sup> The recurrence of the past that is experienced there often takes on conflicting meanings:

For some, then, space means decline, ruin -- a slipping out of time as time slips out of (eternal) Being. As a conglomeration of things, space separates, disperses, and shatters unity, enveloping the finite and concealing its finiteness. For others, by contrast, space is the cradle, birthplace and medium of nature’s communications and commerce with society; thus it is always fertile – always full of antagonisms and/or harmony.<sup>10</sup>

Those are not to be taken as strict binaries, of course, since they often intersect within the same recipient. This is why Lefebvre cautions against any ‘readings’ of space as a text,

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<sup>8</sup> Jörg Dünne und Stephan Günzel, *Raumtheorie. Grundlagentexte aus Philosophie und Kulturwissenschaften* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 298-300.

<sup>9</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1984), 130.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*



because they come with an eagerness to measure and classify that often divests space of its significance and emotional charge. It also means a reduction of complexity. To the question, whether space transmits any given messages to those who interact with it he, consequently responds: “yes and no: spaces contain messages – but can they be reduced to messages?”<sup>11</sup> This corresponds to the refusal of Central European writers across all generations to be instrumentalized for a specific political dogma, even in the name of ‘just causes.’ A good example for this would be how the reduction of the multicultural space of socialist Yugoslavia to state-prescribed anti-fascism and anti-nationalism did not just prevent a coming to terms with its own legacy of violence (of Croatian fascism and Partisan massacres) and thus de facto produced the neo-nationalist sentiments it strived to prevent.

Space has long been considered a stable repository for memory due to its materiality, which was also confirmed by Maurice Halbwachs in his foundational study *On Collective Memory*, who sees it simply as a backdrop to the intertwining social structures which shape collective memory.<sup>12</sup> This ignores the fact that spaces are vulnerable and subject to change, and that their ability to absorb and trigger memory relies as much on their recipient as on locality.<sup>13</sup> As Aleida Assman, one of the most prominent scholars on cultural memory today explains, the memory of space requires

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). Quite significantly, Halbwachs’ third chapter, “The Locations of Memory,” remains a fragment.

<sup>13</sup> Cornelia Kenneweg, *Städte als Erinnerungsräume: Deutungen gesellschaftlicher Umbrüche in der serbischen und bulgarischen Prosa im Sozialismus* (Leipzig: Frank & Timme, 2009), 37.

continuous discursive revitalization.<sup>14</sup> Assmann maintains that the case is different for sites of trauma, which are also at the heart of a literary topography of Central Europe after 1945. Contrary to regular memory sites, they resist an affirmative construction of meaning and hence cannot be transformed into a motivational social component (“positiv verpflichtende Erinnerung”).<sup>15</sup> *Mittleuropa* writings recognize this by aligning themselves with the literary ethics of ‘reconciliation’ that Adorno had called for after the Second World War, since they contribute to the production of “negative experience,” and thus offer ethical guidelines *ex negativo*.<sup>16</sup> Only that “negative experience” among the Austrian and Yugoslav writers I discuss does not generally mean the depiction of atrocities. Instead, it is most powerfully manifest through a haunting sense of absence and loss, which is achieved by the juxtaposition of different memory spaces. It is in this way that the retrieval of memory through literature becomes an act of social criticism.

Despite the fact that a valid argument has been made against the inflationary use of the term trauma when applied to cultural concepts,<sup>17</sup> I believe that trauma’s disruptive effects on memory are clearly demonstrated on the formal level of *Mittleuropa* writings, which always go beyond the mere recounting of historical events. The difficulty to piece together the traumatic past, the sudden assault of memory through external (often spatial) triggers, as well as the distortion of memory are all post-traumatic phenomena that show

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<sup>14</sup> Aleida Assman, *Erinnerungsräume* (Munich: C.H.Beck, 1999), 298- 341.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>16</sup> Brian O’Connor, “Adorno on the Destruction of Memory.” In *Memory: Histories, Theories, Debates*, ed. Susannah Radstone and Bill Schwarz (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 136-149.

<sup>17</sup> Wulf Kantsteiner and Harald Weinböck. “Against the Concept of Cultural Trauma.” In *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning in collaboration with Sara B. Young (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 229.

up through tropes of fragmentation, pastiche, and juxtaposition.<sup>18</sup> Such memory also creates the paradoxical experience of being intimately drawn into a space from which one has disassociated in the past for reasons of self-preservation; the cyclical pull-push dynamics of this process of spatial remembering is also common to the writers I discuss. Due to the particular prominence of the traumatic events of the Holocaust in much of the Mitteleuropa writings after 1945, it has also been called “Holocaust literature.”<sup>19</sup> While I do think that the Second World War and the extermination of Jews that was part of it are foundational for many of the literary *lieux de mémoire* that appear within them, such a reductionist perspective underestimates the dynamic and reciprocal relationship that the literary representation of the Holocaust acquires in dialogue with other experiences of isolation, displacement and destruction in the name of ideology. Such an approach would emphasize, not diminish its paradigmatic function in literature. When Aleida Assman opposes Nora’s thesis that the loss of *milieux de memoire* (and construction of prosthetic *lieux de memoire*) are the result of modernization and historization, she makes a case for recognizing the unprecedented teleological and epistemological unsettlement of the Holocaust as paradigmatic in our perception of memory sites:

Dass ganz Europa nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg mit Erinnerungsorten überzogen ist, hat nichts mit der Modernisierung zu tun, sondern mit dem Gewaltregime der Nationalsozialisten und dem Verbrechen planmäßiger Massenvernichtung. Die Vernichtungslager sind traumatische Orte, weil der Exzess der dort verübten Gräueltaten menschliches Fassungs- und Darstellungsvermögen sprengt.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> On the effects of trauma on memory see Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma. Explorations of Memory* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> Marta Koppany-Moore, “Ornaments of Pain and Survival: A Historical and Literary Analysis of Central European Literature” (PhD Dissertation: University of Texas at Dallas, 2000).

<sup>20</sup> Assman, *Erinnerungsräume*, 339.

Central European literature sees the obligation to remember the violent fractures of 20<sup>th</sup> century history as one of its major ethical impulses. It thus developed in protest of the “culture of amnesia” which has become so endemic in our late modern societies.<sup>21</sup> When trauma is represented spatially, for example through the eyes of a Holocaust survivor who is visiting the town of his childhood on the search for his family home, an example that appears in the writings of Danilo Kiš,<sup>22</sup> the destabilizing effects of trauma on time can be made visible in ways that transcend the techniques of psychological realism. It is sufficient to show the contrast between the old home of the childhood memory and the structures that have replaced it. Through its evocation of multiple places, the literary text tries to push back against the laws of representation, which dictate that simultaneity can only be made visible in space, not language or time. Similarly, time, because it happens sequentially, can only be fully experienced in space, since the spatial dimension contains the intersection of “the axes of diachronic and synchronic.”<sup>23</sup> This intersection produces an overlap between time periods (e.g. new elements that persist alongside old ones, including the traces of destroyed space) and between natural, religious and political space. Over the course of several decades, the writers I discuss attempt to approximate such simultaneity through various formal experiments and techniques, which is why form is so significant for the new literature of *Mitteleuropa*.

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<sup>21</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

<sup>22</sup> Danilo Kiš, *Early Sorrows: for Children and Sensitive Readers*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: New Directions, 1998).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

This is most prominent in their use of intertextuality and interreferentiality, their championing of the short form, vignette and fragment, their mixing of contrasting thematic genres and tropes: a collage of vignettes constitutes a short story, documentary meets autobiography, melancholy meets irony, utopia intersects with dystopia. The form that lends itself most formidably to such permanent transgressions is the essay, its nature of tentative inquiry subverts common assumptions of secure knowledge, its openness and fluidity allow it to combine a number of juxtaposed themes, none of which can or even need to be fully explored; it thus creates its own chaotic topography. As the genre of self-reflection and self-inquiry ever since it was established by Michel de Montaigne, it is fond of the anecdote and the aphorism, the casual web of references that situate it between literature and philosophy. Through this personal dimension, along with its admitted omissions and meanderings, it performs on the textual level, the meeting of “lived” and “perceived” space that Lefebvre called for: “Blanks (i.e. the contrast between absence and presence) and margins, hence networks and webs, have a *lived* sense, which has to be raised intact to the conceptual level.”<sup>24</sup> In its concern for memory, which is always tied to acknowledgement and literary reenactment of absences, Central European literature displays a profound ethical concern. It asks whose vested interests occlude or rewrite certain collective memories, how can the preservation of certain spaces through literature engage what has been forgotten, but also how does the literary reflection of materiality conversely, influence the perception of space? By means of intertextual references, Central European literature points beyond itself to create a network of memory sites, but also an implied Central European community of writers across

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 132.

temporal and spatial boundaries. Renate Lachman has demonstrated intertextuality as a powerful mnemonic device.<sup>25</sup>

I also argue that Central European literature, by acknowledging the emotional power that is invested into certain locations, attempts to transform abstract “space” (the space of power politics and strategic planning) into “place” (a place that is intimately known, and that satisfies the universal human need for home), a process outlined by Yi-Fu Tuan in his humanist study on cultural geography, *Space and Place* (1977). This of course, describes exactly the underpinnings of collective memory – the longing for group allegiance and rootedness. He cites the example of the physicists Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr, who visit Kronberg castle in Denmark, which is widely understood as the setting for Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In spite of their scientific commitment to objectivity, their knowledge of Shakespeare’s play changes their material perception of the place:

Suddenly the walls and ramparts speak quite a different language. The courtyard becomes an entire world, a dark corner reminds us of the darkness in the human soul, we hear Hamlet’s “To be or not to be.” Yet all we really know about Hamlet is that his name appears in a thirteenth century chronicle. No one can prove that he really lived, let alone that he lived there. But everyone knows the question Shakespeare had him ask, the human depth he was made to reveal, and so he, too, has to be found a place on earth, here in Kronberg. And once we know that, Kronberg becomes quite a different castle for us.<sup>26</sup>

Literature contributes to the concreteness of space, in the same way that real or imagined spaces inspire literary production. Those who are writing with the awareness of the Central European legacy are aware of this reciprocal relationship, as can be discerned in their work: Ingeborg Bachmann’s sense of the Central European identity is created

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<sup>25</sup> Renate Lachmann, *Memory and Literature: Intertextuality in Russian Modernism*, trans. Roy Sellars and Anthony Wall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>26</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 4.

through references to Joseph Roth's Habsburg periphery, Stefan Zweig's literary humanism, but also the ultimate appropriation of *Heimat* in the proto-fascist Austrian *Grenzland* novel. Peter Handke's Central Europe, on the other hand, is based on a utopian exaltation of the former Yugoslavs. It abounds with linguistic and cultural references to that region, but also recurs to ancient mythology and folklore in order to shield that precious space from a revisionist, exploitative approach to Central Europe. Danilo Kiš, a master of this Central Europe literary pastiche, creates rich interrefential maps of Central Europe sites in which the Prague German Franz Kafka enters into a dialogue with the Croatian Habsburg critic Miroslav Krleža and the master of intertextuality Jorge Luis Borges. This practice becomes even more intensified after 1989, as I show with the Austrian writers Christoph Ransmayr and the ex-Yugoslav Dubravka Ugrešić. Their texts unsettle the humanist canon of European writers and thinkers that is still so foundational for the postwar period through a maddening postmodern web that juxtaposes high literature to modern media and trivial myths, but also unhinges all coordinates of time and space instead of just layering them in a palimpsestic manner.

A few comments on terminology – due to the polyvalence of *Mitteleuropa*, I will be using a variety of designations when referring to it. When I speak of Central Europe as a concept or idea, I refer to a cultural notion with a few dominant traits: When equated with the “Habsburg myth,” which is quite narrowly defined by Claudio Magris, it connotes a nostalgic distortion of the Habsburg past that differs considerably from György Konrad's “idea” of Central Europe, which foregrounds the utopian potential of Central European art as rooted in the same nostalgic writers that Magris reprimands for their dreaminess. As such it may refer to the idea of multiculturalism or a transnational

community of arts, a Europe of the underdog or the margin, with its gravitational center pivoted further east, or the dark counterpart of its humanist promise, the totality of its historical fractures in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. When I talk about the discourse of Central Europe, I refer to the multiplicity of debates, which produced those distinct ideas, and the ways in which they are continuously exchanged, confirmed and contested in mutual dialogue. Since this set of ideas, beliefs, and narrative practices around Central Europe have always alternated between the representation and production of power dynamics, the discourse of Central Europe also relates to the way that Michel Foucault conceived of discourse as a negotiation of power.<sup>27</sup> As a transnational memory discourse, I show how Central Europe is specifically linked to the memories of fascism and communism as intercrossing structures of terror. In its latest stage, one might argue that a third aspect enters into the picture – the unsettling influence of late capitalism. Much of the analysis of *Mittleuropa* imagery in literature has remained more or less structuralist; this dissertation seeks to overcome that. I am not so much interested in finding traces of the Habsburg Empire or any of the destabilizing historical events listed above as I want to show how the memory of the Habsburg reign is used as a foil for these later developments, and how it engages with them to produce new meanings. I will use Central Europe and *Mittleuropa* interchangeably when referring to the discourse, even though the German term clearly captures its numerous historical connotations more accurately. Central Europe, even in its German version, “Zentraleuropa,” has conversely been adopted by some critics due to its

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<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Pantheon, 1972).



presumed neutrality.<sup>28</sup> I disagree with this interpretation, since it cedes the term to its relatively short period of actual negative appropriation (roughly between 1915 and 1945) and diminishes the long tradition of writing which has reinterpreted it under the premises of a humanistic and pluralistic imagination coming from the Habsburg Empire.<sup>29</sup> It also ignores the fact that *Mitteleuropa*, even when transferred into other languages in its German original, especially Slavic idioms, does not automatically connote German expansionism. Instead, it is often positively associated with an idealized image of the former Habsburg empire, which is in my opinion much more influential for the genesis of the literary discourse than the former.

By offering a comparative approach of Austrian and Yugoslav literature in the postwar period, my project is situating *Mitteleuropa* in the history of the tumultuous and antagonistic, but also symbiotic German-Slavic relations in the region.<sup>30</sup> After all, the German term *Mitteleuropa* was popularized across the region by the Prussian Reichstag member and pastor Friedrich Naumann in 1915, who proposed an economic union of the Austrian and German empires to guarantee peace after the First World War. Naturally,

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<sup>28</sup> Jacques Le Rider, "Mitteleuropa, Zentraleuropa, Mittelosteuropa: a Mental Map of Central Europe," *European Journal of Social Theory* 2008 (11): 155.

<sup>29</sup> I situate the beginning of this period roughly with Hugo von Hofmannsthal's speech "Österreich im Spiegel seiner Dichtung," (1915) which juxtaposed *reichsdeutsche* economic and political conceptions of *Mitteleuropa* to the "spiritual notion" of Europe in the Habsburg territories. As I will show, this juxtaposition is maintained by both Austrian and Eastern European writers from the postwar period until after the end of the Cold War. See Hugo von Hofmannsthal: *Sämtliche Werke XXXIV: Reden und Aufsätze 3 - 1910-1919*, ed. Klaus E. Bohnenkamp, Katja Kaluga, and Klaus-Dieter Krabiel (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2011), 13-25.

<sup>30</sup> On this general topic, see Heino Berg and Peter Burmeister, ed., *Mitteleuropa und die deutsche Frage* (Bremen: Ed. Temen, 1990); Jürgen Elvert. *Mitteleuropa! Deutsche Pläne zur europäischen Neuordnung (1918 -1945)* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1999); Peter Katzenstein, ed., *Mitteleuropa. Between Europe and Germany* (Oxford: Berghahn, 1997); Peter M.R. Stirk, *Mitteleuropa. History and Prospects* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994).

Naumann assumed that this gigantic multinational entity would flourish under German auspices, and appease the unruly minor nations in its territory, which is why he is so often interpreted as a forerunner of the kind of German expansionism that would rear its ugly head in the Third Reich. When Hitler declared the Jews of the region non-human parasites and the Slavs naturally born slaves, he was building on a history of old essentialisms, which, at least in the Slavic case, did not always have the same pernicious outcome. Since the romantic nationalism of Johann Gottfried von Herder, such ethnic (or ethnographic) and national categorizations have also had the effect of intercultural exchange, albeit an often asymmetric one.<sup>31</sup> With the ongoing power struggles between the German administrators and its Slavic minorities in the Habsburg Empire, and even more with the rise of Pangerman and Panslavic movements in the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which provided welcome inspiration to both National Socialism and Stalinism, the basis for *Mitteleuropa* as a notion of German hegemony was laid. This chasm grew out of larger Western projections of Eastern Europe as a location of inferiority, exoticism and disorder, which had been in the making since the Enlightenment.<sup>32</sup>

In contrast to that, I look at the ways in which the poetics of *Mitteleuropa* has always tried to counter racist and nationalist tendencies in favor of a more cultural and less political transnationalism. After the collapse of the Habsburg era, it sought to salvage the pluralism and artistic networks that had flourished during that time, and after the

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<sup>31</sup> It was Herder who had praised Serbian folk songs as the authentic, historical archive of the Serbian people, and who inspired Goethe to an adaptation of one of its major ballads Miranda Jaktiša and Christoph Deupmann, “Die stolze Scham der Hasanaginica. Goethe’s *Klagegesang von den edlen Frauen des Hasan Aga* und die südslavische Vorlage als Archiv kultursynkretistischer Prozesse,” *Poetica* Vol. 36, No. 3/4 (2004), 379-402.

<sup>32</sup> Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: the Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994).

atrocities of Nazism, it retraced the topography of its destruction as a warning against the homogenizing frenzy of extreme nationalism. The dissidents of the 1980s rediscovered *Mittleuropa* as a geopoetical trope of regional allegiance, which they contrasted to the geopolitical objectives of both Soviet collectivity and the fascist past used for its legitimation. It faced a greater challenge in Eastern Europe in the period of post-communist transition, where the enthusiastic recuperation of national memory sites seemed to take precedence over transnational ties. As I particularly show in my final chapter, however, despite of the hurried “invention of tradition” happening during that time, *Mittleuropa* did not become obsolete, but was unearthed in its utopian and admonishing manifestations soon after.

The French Germanist and historian Jacques Le Rider, who considers *Mittleuropa* a *lieu de mémoire* in the sense of Pierre Nora, has acknowledged its bifurcated implications: on one hand, *Mittleuropa* comes across as “a lieu de mémoire of cultural plurality which allows multilingualism and ‘hybrid identities’ to flourish,” but it also always points to the fact that “the twentieth century has striven to dismantle and deform *Mittleuropa*: the First World War, Nazism and the Shoah, the Second World War, Stalinism and Neo-Stalinism.”<sup>33</sup> By placing the pluralistic ideals on which specifically the Austrian notion of *Mittleuropa* was based in dialectical relationship to the dystopian dimension of the Mitteleuropean territory, this approach acknowledges the ambivalent nature which Pierre Nora had claimed for his *lieux de mémoire*:

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<sup>33</sup> Jaques Le Rider, “Mittleuropa as lieu de memoire,” in collaboration with Sara B. Young, in *Cultural Memory Studies: an International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*, ed. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, (Berlin; New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 37.

The lieux of which I speak are hybrid places, mutants in a sense, compounded of life and death, of the temporal and the eternal. They are like Möbius strips, endless rounds of the collective and the individual, the prosaic and the sacred, the immutable and the fleeting. For although it is true that the fundamental purpose of a lieu de mémoire is to stop time, to inhibit forgetting, to fix a state of things, to immortalize death, and to materialize the immaterial [...] all in order to capture the maximum possible meaning with the fewest possible signs – it is also clear that lieux de mémoire thrive only because of their capacity of change, their ability to resurrect old meanings and generate new ones along with new and unforeseeable connections (this is what makes them exciting).<sup>34</sup>

The hybridity and protean dimension of memory sites arises from the crisis of memory that they imminently reflect, and which they seek to remedy. *Mitteleuropa* was taken up again by the dissident discourse of the 1980s out of a similar sentiment: in the face of collective amnesia, exclusive ideologies and impermeable borders, the ideal of a civil society, transnational humanism, and a unifying cultural memory was held alive by *Mitteleuropa* not as a reactionary dream, but as a subversive program. In this context, it needs to be pointed out that *Mitteleuropa* as a concept was first formulated by Austrian Jews and that it is inextricably tied to Jewish intellectual history. The Habsburg citizens Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth had produced their passionate endorsements of a pan-European, transnational culture of tolerance for the same reasons. By highlighting the leading role of assimilated Jews as ideal Europeans and cultural mediators of the region, they were claiming the right to their homeland of *Mitteleuropa*, which, in spite of its injustices and setbacks was the only space they perceived as flexible enough to offer them cultural refuge. The hopes and failures of the Austrian interwar writers need to be understood first if we aim to analyze their influence on the spatial conceptions in the writings of an author like the Austrian Ingeborg Bachmann, whose work is an excellent

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<sup>34</sup> Pierre Nora, “General Introduction: Between History and Memory,” in *Realms of Memory. The Construction of the French Past*, Vol.1: Conflicts and Divisions (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 15.

example for the critical reinterpretation of the discourse in the Austrian postwar period. It is both appropriate and ironic that the destruction of Central European Jewry is the event that is lamented by Jewish and non-Jewish postwar writers on *Mitteleuropa*, while it functions, at the same time as the catalyst for the critical turn of the discourse. Like the now forgotten urban nodes of Central Europe in which they figured as the often cited “cultural ferment,” their once defining influence was now merely felt as a ghostly presence. The reason for this was not only that numerous Jewish authors from Austria, Germany, and Eastern Europe were murdered or displaced during the Holocaust, but also (and this is particularly true for Austria) that many of those who did return did not write about their memories of either Nazi period or the time that preceded it, for decades to come.<sup>35</sup> In spite of the official stance of anti-fascism, things were not much better in Socialist Yugoslavia. For one, the ideology of brotherhood and unity did not allow for the special acknowledgement of Jews amongst the mass of the victims of fascism. But a more comprehensive examination of the Holocaust in the Yugoslav republics, particularly the crimes committed by the Nazi puppet state of Independent Croatia, was also avoided for fear that it might stir up already existing tensions between Croats and Serbs. So even though they were acknowledged as one of Yugoslavia’s many ethnicities, and enjoyed full participatory rights in the Socialist project, the specifically Jewish experience did not show up in Yugoslav literary texts until the 1970s with a liberalization

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<sup>35</sup> In Austria, there was no literary attempt at a ‘coming to terms with the past’ by Jewish authors until the late 1980s, which is a when the second generation began to publish. There were partial exceptions to this like Ilse Aichinger’s *Die größere Hoffnung* (1948), which describes a childhood during the Nazi period. But in the conservative atmosphere of the post-1955 Austrian Republic, such works received little or no attention. I will say more about this later on.

of the public sphere. And compared to the Soviet member states, Anti-semitism, though existent, was rather subdued.<sup>36</sup>

An important distinction has to be made in the self-positioning between eastern and western European writers within a *Mitteleuropa* framework. Both Austrian and Yugoslav *Mitteleuropa* writers conceive of themselves as “deterritorialized” subjects, no matter whether they have actually been displaced from home or not, since their temporal dislocation, their being haunted by a past which is not publicly acknowledged makes them strangers to their environment. In spite of their avowal of marginality, and their sympathy for small nations, the concept of *littérature mineure* as laid out by Guattari and Deleuze<sup>37</sup> cannot be entirely applied to Mitteleuropean writers. Kundera had defined the geographic Mitteleuropa as “the insecure zone of small nations between Russia and Germany,” specifying in turn that “a small nation is one whose very existence may be put in question at any moment; a small nation can disappear and it knows it [...],” the Jewish people being “the small nation *par excellence*.”<sup>38</sup> But while the new *Mitteleuropa* connects east and west, Germans and Slavs, the representatives of small nations who subscribe to a Central European poetics all write in their “minor” mother tongues, and the “deterritorialization” they experience is not linguistic but rather historical and cultural. The other indicators of “minor literatures” – the preponderance of the political and collective over the individual – are not only outright refuted by a Central European

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<sup>36</sup> See Hans-Christian Petersen and Samuel Salzborn, ed., *Antisemitism in Eastern Europe: History and Present in Comparison* (Frankfurt am Main; New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>38</sup> Kundera, *The Tragedy of Central Europe*, 7-8.

poetics, but also not a structural feature in the literature it produces.

The Yugoslav author Danilo Kiš has expressed his indignation at such assumptions, (which, albeit applied to another marginal space, also lie at the heart of Frederic Jameson's essay on "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism"<sup>39</sup>) pointedly in his polemical manifesto "Homo Poeticus, Regardless." It is directed against the western stereotype of the barbaric Easterner, who is only able to write about the peculiar political problems of his marginal country, an innate "homo politicus" as opposed to the "homo poeticus," the master of Western European *belles lettres*:

We are exotica, we are political scandal, we are, at best, fond memories from the First World War and the conscience of the old *poilus d'Orient* and the members of the Resistance. [...] We are barely a part of European culture... Politics? Fine! Sightseeing? Terrific! *Slivovitz* (as the Germans have it)? Of course! But who in God's name would find literature there? Who would be expected to make sense of their nationalist nonsense and all those languages and dialects, all of them so similar and yet so different (or so they claim), all of their religions and regions?<sup>40</sup>

This opens up a third parameter for the demarcation of Central Europe which has not been sufficiently researched so far – it has to be positioned not just against Occident and Orient but also in relation to the ultimate marginal space, traditionally considered the cushioning between Europe and Asia – the Balkans.<sup>41</sup> As a geographical designation, the Balkans are much more concrete and easier defined against the backdrop of historical

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<sup>39</sup> Frederic Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text* No. 15 (Autumn, 1986), 65-88.

<sup>40</sup> Danilo Kiš, "Homo Poeticus. Regardless," in *Homo Poetics. Essays and Interviews* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 75.

<sup>41</sup> On the return of the Balkans in Western discourse see Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Misha Glenny, *The Balkans. 1804-1999: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers* (London: Granta Books, 1999); Mark Mazower, *The Balkans: a Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2002).

events than Edward Said's somewhat vague and reductionist vision of the "Orient."<sup>42</sup> Significantly, in the response of Western intellectuals to the Balkan conflict of the 1990s, the question of Yugoslavia turns into a question of Europe. Here we witness the curious situation that in spite of Tito's historical "no" to Stalin and Yugoslavia's subsequent role in the non-alignment movement, which led to both inside and outside perceptions of it as a Western enclave in the east, Orientalist stereotypes were revived by the concerned observers. In the western imaginary, Serbian nationalists in particular were transformed into a new reincarnation of European villainy.<sup>43</sup> The violence erupting on the margins of European civilization was viewed as a threat to Western stability, but when it came to the touchy subject of outside intervention, the bloodshed in Bosnia might as well be happening in Africa. This was indicative of two patterns that have determined the discourse of Central Europe since its beginning – the dialectics between developed center and underdeveloped margins, and the function of its marginal parts as a projection screen for the violent potential of modern Europe in general.

In a collection of essays weightily entitled *Europa im Krieg*<sup>44</sup> eminent intellectuals from Germany, Austria, Hungary and the disintegrating Yugoslavia presented their positions on the Yugoslav secession wars. The German author Hans Magnus Enzenberger concluded on a trip to Uganda that the events in Yugoslavia

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<sup>42</sup> Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 1997.

<sup>43</sup> On the association particularly with Serbia as a nationalist culture of violence, see Tomislav Z. Longinović, *Vampire Nation. Violence as Cultural Imaginary* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> György Konrad, ed., *Europa im Krieg. Die Debatte über den Krieg im ehemaligen Jugoslawien* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992).



compare to the incomprehensible wars between African tribes, the only solution being to let the warring sides exhaust themselves: “Es gibt nur eines, dass den Bürgerkrieg beenden kann. Das ist die Erschöpfung.”<sup>45</sup> Enzensberger was succumbing to what Arjun Appadurai has termed “primordialism,” i.e. the assumption that certain populations are naturally violent because of their emphasis of primordial and tribal bonds (blood, soil, race) which at the same time makes them pre-modern – not surprisingly, it is usually applied to Third World countries.<sup>46</sup> The primordial theory is particularly applied at time periods when societies transition from structures of authoritarian rule to independent nation states, and is considered a typical phenomenon for the growing pains of democracy. Appadurai refutes primordialism as outdated in an increasingly transnational, nomadic, and deterritorialized world. Many displaced communities or minorities, he argues, do not articulate the wish for their own nation state, while others respond with a counternationalism that can be just as aggressive. He concludes: “This vicious circle can only be escaped when a language is found to capture complex, nonterritorial, postnational forms of allegiance.”<sup>47</sup> In many ways, the literature of *Mitteleuropa* has tried to establish such a language through the literary creation of decentered spaces, which confirm Appadurai’s notion of “locality” in that they are “primarily relational and contextual rather than spatial and scalar.”<sup>48</sup> The relational and contextual dynamics of *Mitteleuropa*, the way that writers across the region recur to common influences in the arts and

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<sup>45</sup> Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Bosnien, Uganda. Eine afrikanische Ansichtskarte,” in *Europa im Krieg* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992), 90.

<sup>46</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

literature, and the way that they process and reproduce cultural memory together has always been underestimated. A major part of my objective is to disentangle the conflation of the cultural and the political relating to the discourse, which first requires a thorough examination at how it was generated. Through the analysis of six authors from both Austria and the former Yugoslavia, I intend to show that *Mitteleuropa* is conceptualized as a substitute for official memory politics, which are always tied to the limited perspective of the nation state and thus fail to address the complex memory exchanges across national borders sufficiently.

My first chapter links the early literary manifestations of *Mitteleuropa*, particularly in Austrian Jewish literature between 1920 and 1945, to the critical Central Europe discourse of the 1980s. I explain why the concept of the “Habsburg myth” as popularized by the Italian Germanist Claudio Magris in 1963 has been applied to *Mitteleuropa* writings, but is altogether incomplete. While much attention has been paid to the stereotypes popularized by Habsburg writers like Robert Musil and Joseph Roth, I am foregrounding their critical assessment of Austro-Hungarian society, such as the empire’s stagnant political apparatus, or its dismissal of the non-Germanic provinces. I discuss in which ways Eastern European dissidents in the 1980s drew on the reflections made by Joseph Roth and others, without abandoning the utopian desire for a transnational, multiethnic, and non-dogmatic community of arts. Not coincidentally, the dissident debate highlights those literary works that were written right before the rise of Nazism and mourn the loss of a ‘Central European civilization.’ Through a close analysis of three foundational essays, Milan Kundera’s, “A Tragedy of Central Europe,” (1984), György Konrad’s “My Dream of Central Europe“ (1986), and Czeslaw Milosz’s

“Central European Attitudes,”(1986), I show that *Mitteleuropa* was not envisioned as a revival of imperialistic structures but their subversion – a tendency which is already dormant in the literary traditions of the old empire. This chapter also juxtaposes the literary notion of *Mitteleuropa* to expansionist and proto-fascist appropriations of the term by German and Austrian politicians. It further demonstrates the extent to which the discourse deliberately reinvents itself in a postcolonial and ideologically critical manner.

With the moral burden of fascism that the young generation of Austrian writers had to face after 1945, *Mitteleuropa*, both as a debate and an imaginary, acquires an additional dimension beyond the legacy of the multiethnic Habsburg Empire. My second chapter discusses how two iconic Austrian writers, Ingeborg Bachmann and Peter Handke, engage with both pasts in the form of a permanent balancing act: their conscious affirmation of Austrian identity and history is always accompanied by attempts to deconstruct the stifling parameters of that framework. While their upbringing in the border region of Carinthia provided them with the experience of a Habsburg-like diversity through the cultural and linguistic exchange with Southeastern neighbors, their families’ personal involvement in Nazism, as well as the postwar atmosphere of collective denial showed them the inherent potential for its exact opposite. By analyzing narratives of adolescent exploration and disillusioned return, I demonstrate how both authors develop their own poetics of memory, which is contingent on marginal and transnational spaces. Their *Mitteleuropa* is one in which remnants of Habsburg history collide with territories and lifelines that were brutally disrupted by Nazism. Dissatisfied with the proscriptive nature of political engagement in Austria and Germany, Bachmann and Handke both develop an antipolitical, humanist stance towards ethical writing, where

art takes on the highest function of guidance. But while Handke's path as a writer starts off on a similar ethical footing as Bachmann's, his later writings succumb to a highly problematic historical mysticism, partly due to the onset of the 1980s debate on Central Europe.

In my third chapter, I examine the imaginaries of Central Europe in the writings of Danilo Kiš and Aleksandar Tišma, two Yugoslav Jewish writers from the Serbian border province of the Vojvodina. They come from a similarly multiethnic region and were equally influential on the literary scene as Handke and Bachmann, however, their Jewish backgrounds and personal experiences of displacement and genocide result in a quite different literary representation of fascist violence. I am particularly interested in the ways in which Kiš and Tišma prefigure the debate of the 1980s on one hand, and map out Central Europe as a space of violence, loss and traumatic memory on the other. Against an official doctrine of anti-fascism and plurality, they construct the inconvenient narratives of victims eclipsed by party taglines. By making literature a "corrective of history" (Kiš), they explore not only the crimes committed by the Nazi puppet states of independent Croatia (NDH) and fascist Hungary, but also the terrors of communism (prison camps, torture, persecution). Comparing Kiš's and Tišma's writing between the 1960s and 1980s, I show why their specific political situation states Central Europe as a fragmented but also potentially redeeming space.

Finally, my fourth and last chapter examines why the idea of *Mittleuropa* both as critical poetics and utopian space remains relevant even after the redrawing of the political map and the *de facto* end of Soviet rule. At the same time that the experience of a Europe without borders suddenly became available to the former eastern bloc, it fell

apart for a group that had already believed itself Central European: the multiethnic, multilingual Yugoslavs. The dissolution of the former Yugoslavia was staged as the apocalyptic failure of the idea both by German and Austrian writers, as well as in the respective Socialist republics that had once been part of the federation. This examination of the last stage of *Mitteleuropa* offers an overview of the literary reactions to the Yugoslav secession wars through the lens of the Austrian author Christoph Ransmayr and the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić. In particular, I analyze at how their texts reframe the concept of Central Europe in the 1980s and 1990s in response to radical shifts in public memory policies both in Austria and the newly independent Croatia. In both cases, a recently changed public relationship to fascist legacies had revived old nationalist stereotypes – and once more, a Central European poetics was sought to undermine the systematic manipulation of memory and prevent a repetition of past wrongs.

## **Chapter 1: The Legacy of *Mittleuropa*: Between Geopolitics and Geopoetics**

Since its inception, *Mittleuropa* has been caught between the dichotomy of its political and poetical implications, and its assessments depended on which camp one chose. Siding with the poets' idea of *Mittleuropa* connoted, particularly since the interwar years in Austria, a sense of regional solidarity that transcended all national, ethnic and religious affiliations, and that was firmly grounded in the memory of the Habsburg Empire. It thrived off bourgeois ideas of education and the mediating powers of its cultural production, be that literature, the arts or philosophy. As such it was revived by the Eastern European dissidents of the 1980s, who separated it strictly from the *Mittleuropa* of the politicians. This is because the political term "Mittleuropa" came with a certain baggage of German expansionist and imperialist aspirations that had been developed since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>49</sup> In this context, Central European geography had appeared as coveted territory. Furthermore, a hierarchy between its superior and inferior peoples (which pitted Germans against Slavs, but also Jews) was imposed onto it. In its modest expression this translated into a civilizatory mission led by the Germans; under totalitarian auspices, it turned into a plan for the displacement, enslavement and extinction of the undesirable majority of its population. Hitler's objective to conquer this "Lebensraum im Osten" on behalf of the space-deprived German people was a major motivation for the instigation of the Second World War, which, unsurprisingly, began with the occupation of Poland, who, as the largest Slavic minority on German territory had been the favorite anathema to Pan-German agitators from the beginning. With the

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<sup>49</sup> Johannes Feichtinger, "Zwischen Mittel-und Zentraleuropa. Oder: Vom politisch überformten Raum zum heuristischen Konzept," in *Mittleuropa. Geschichte eines transnationalen Diskurses*, ed. Jacques Lajarrige, Walter Schmitz und Giusi Zanasi (Dresden: Thelem 2011), 53–73.

almost seamless takeover by Soviet rule after the war, which forfeited the sovereignty of the Poles, Czechs, Hungarians and others once again, it should not come as a surprise that a ‘politics’ of Central Europe came to be synonymous with the experience of occupation, as the careful positioning of Czeslaw Miłosz on the topic in 1986 demonstrates:

Central Europe is hardly a geographical notion. It is not easy to trace its boundaries on the map even if, while walking the streets of its cities, we do not doubt of its survival, whether that be in my native Wilno, or the differently baroque Prague or medieval-Renaissance Dubrovnik. The ways of feeling and thinking of its inhabitants must thus suffice for drawing mental lines which seem to be more durable than the borders of states.<sup>50</sup>

Miłosz proposes a Central Europe that transcends geography to avoid a debate on territoriality that runs contrary to the principles of a generous and diverse transnational cultural network. His much more loosely organized, associative mental map therefore links Wilno, Prague and Dubrovnik, defying the political fact that the first two are located in Soviet territory while the third lies in the non-aligned Socialist Yugoslavia, which makes the inhabitants of the latter enjoy considerably more mobility than those of the former. Nationality is only insofar a relevant factor that the citizens of all three cities are historically placed in the buffer zone between German, Russian, and to certain extent also Ottoman spheres of influence, but the modern nationalism which ties a people to a national territory is implicitly rejected here. Miłosz, who was born in Lithuania to a Polish family in 1911 and lived in German occupied Warsaw during the Second World War, witnessed firsthand how pernicious dreams of a homogenous, ethnically ‘pure’ nation state could be. This is why a dynamic, constructivist notion of Central Europe is given preference to materialist views that are susceptible to essentialist tendencies: While

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<sup>50</sup> Czesław Miłosz, “Central European Attitudes,” *Cross Currents A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, Vol. 5 (1986): 101.

the real space of Central Europe has affective impact insofar as its landscapes and architecture constitute reminders of a common cultural history, what defines it most are the mental lines, i.e. imaginative projections of its inhabitants. In its literary manifestations, the sites of intense human exchange that dot the map of Central Europe, (cities, buildings, railway lines etc.) therefore function as ‘triggers of memory’ for its past:

[T]he past of that area – a common past in spite of the multitude of languages and nationalities – is always present there and is made very real by the architecture of its cities, the traditions of its universities and the work of its poets.<sup>51</sup>

The material dimension is presented as a consequence of its cultural production, but since the ties between the different Central European nationalities have been severed due to a homogenizing Soviet occupation, a discrepancy between real and imagined space has taken place. Because of this, “[i]n these decades of the XXth century Central Europe seems to exist only in the minds of some of its intellectuals.”<sup>52</sup> Miłosz embraces the non-concreteness that comes with its relegation to the imaginary realm as an antidote to the pseudo-scientific vigor that justified the occupation of Central European space by Nazi Germany: “[...] we do not have at our disposal precise instruments and must, therefore, accept in advance a certain vagueness.” Communism’s public focus on progress and futurity has transposed the Central European past to the realm of literature, which consequently mirrors this disruption in the time-space continuum. It shows time as “intense, spasmodic, full of surprises, indeed practically an active participant in the story. This is because time is associated with a danger threatening the national community to

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



which a writer belongs.”<sup>53</sup> Miłosz is not simply referring to the passage of time but rather to the imbalance in its collective perception. The disrupted time which he describes is also echoed in Stefan Zweig’s memoir *The World of Yesterday* (1943), which has been read as a classic of Austrian Mitteleuropa literature. Zweig, who described the end of the Habsburg era, as well as the disastrous consequences of the First World War and the Nazi takeover of Europe, contrasted the time of totalitarian ideologies to the “wind-still time” of his parent’s generation:”

How little they knew, as they muddled through in security and comfort and possessions, that life can also be tension and profusion, a continuous state of being surprised, and being lifted up from all sides; little did they think in their touching liberalism and optimism that each succeeding day that dawns outside our window can smash our life.<sup>54</sup>

Already for Zweig’s generation, Central European time had stopped running at the ordered, predictable pace he associated with his Habsburg youth. But it is not only the seismic political shifts in Austria, that contributed to this development: the dawning technological age had initiated the circulation of mass media at a hitherto unseen speed, which lead to “an organization of simultaneity” by means of which “[everyone was] constantly drawn into [...] time.”<sup>55</sup> *Mitteleuropa* then, had already come to connote in the writings of the interwar Austrian writers what it would continue to mean for the eastern European dissidents some fifty years later: both a past heterogeneous world that had been lost in the turmoils of history, but also that same world in its destroyed, fragmented state; a past solidified in space that could only be accessed through private recollection,

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>54</sup> Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, trans. Benjamin W. Huebsch and Helmut Ripperger (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), 27.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., xxi.

individual memory. In Zweig as in Miłosz, the memory of *Mitteleuropa* becomes both a tool for survival and a source of re-traumatization, since it includes multiple experiences of occupation and oppression.

### **Germany and Mitteleuropa**

Though identical in name, the postwar *Mitteleuropa* is not the “phantom” of absolute German or Russian rule, which Miłosz sees symbolized in the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact of 1939, since the objective of the new vision is precisely to “resist the temptations of national chauvinism.” Miłosz’s friend and fellow writer, the Hungarian György Konrad responds similarly when confronted with the imperialist legacy of the idea: “A Hungarian (Czech, Polish, Austrian, German) empire? Foolishness, unless it is an empire of understanding.”<sup>56</sup> The most vital skill in this meeting ground of minor nations is getting to know one’s neighbors. Rather than a pseudomystical relationship to a concrete geography, he argues, what links Central Europeans to each other is their common history, “what we’ve learned here.”<sup>57</sup> But since ‘what was learned’ is inextricably tied to the “phantom” of a totalitarian *Mitteleuropa* despite such statements of disavowal, a brief history of origins seems necessary here.

While the theoretical framework, that turned “Mitteleuropa” into a shorthand for the racially motivated colonization of Eastern Europe, had already been laid down by German nationalists in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it did not attain its radicalized form until the interwar years, fed by frustration of the territorial secessions Germany had to make and a

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<sup>56</sup> György Konrád, “Is the Dream of Central Europe Still Alive?” *Cross Currents, A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, Vol. 5 (1985): 109.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*,

period of economic crisis. The German notion of “Geopolitik” was first developed by the cultural geographer Friedrich Ratzel (1844-1904) who was also responsible for the socio-cultural coinage of the term “Lebensraum,” which was later enthusiastically appropriated by the Nazis. Rather than just as the random biological habitat of a species (its original use), Ratzel defined “Lebensraum” as the geographic area that provides sustenance for a people or nation, and which expands proportionally to the vitality and growth of its inhabitants. He assumed a Darwinian struggle for space as naturally given, so the people that could culturally best adapt to their environment by means of technology, social organization, and intellectual skills would eventually displace those tribes that were less adapted to, and bonded with the soil.<sup>58</sup> Ratzel’s notions were further developed by geographer and university professor Karl Haushofer (1896-1946), who later became, somewhat questionably, known as Hitler’s main geostrategist.<sup>59</sup> Haushofer founded the *Zeitschrift für Geopolitik* in Munich and emphasized the relationship between geography, warfare and imperialism. Haushofer’s teachings were transmitted to Hitler via his student Rudolf Hess, where they turned from a nationalist view of spatial expansion to a racial one. Fantasies of an enlarged Germanic empire that would absorb the majority of Eastern and Southeastern Europe have existed since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and were furthered by the founding of Pan-German and ultra-nationalist associations such as the Alldeutscher Verband (Pangerman League, 1891), of which Ratzel was a member, and the declamatorily racist Deutscher Ostmarkenverein (German Eastern Marches Society, 1894) whose objective was the Germanization of Poles in the eastern German provinces.

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<sup>58</sup> Woodruff D. Smith, “Friedrich Ratzel and the Origins of Lebensraum,” *German Studies Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Feb., 1980): 51-53.

<sup>59</sup> David Thomas Murphy, “Hitler’s Geostrategist? The Myth of Karl Haushofer and the Institute for Geopolitics,” *The Historian*, 2014. Volume 76, Issue 1, (Spring 2014): 1-3.

The German liberal economist Friedrich List, who laid the foundations of the Deutscher Zollverein (German Tax Union, 1833) and pioneered the German railway system, imagined a union of Germany, Austria and Hungary that would cover all of Southeastern Europe and reach up to the Black Sea. List, who had lived and traveled in North America extensively, considered those regions the German ‘hinterland’ that was waiting to be cultivated and logistically connected to the German ‘center’.<sup>60</sup> He was supported by the geographer Ernst Hasse, who in 1895 had published a narrative of colonialist utopia entitled *Großdeutschland und Mitteleuropa um das Jahr 1950*. Following in the footsteps of Ratzel, Hasse maintained that the colonization of borderlands in Europe (“Grenzkolonisation”) instead of overseas colonies was the most natural development of the German state, anticipating notions of Darwinist geography that would be incorporated seamlessly in Hitler’s plans for the murder and displacement of ‘inferior races’ in the eastern territories. Hannah Arendt has discussed Ernst Hasse’s brand of Pan-German imperialism, which was accompanied by ferocious anti-Semitism and anti-Slavism, as the precursor of Nazi totalitarianism.<sup>61</sup> Arendt also saw the conflict between Pan-Germanism and Pan-Slavism as the seed for the defensive brutality with which Nazi Germany expanded into the Slavic east, attempting on one hand to create the space needed for the national health of the Aryan people, and on the other to curb the Slavic menace coming from Russia. While Arendt considered Pan-Slavism under Stalinist auspices as equally disastrous as National Socialism, she understood why the minor nations of Central Europe who had been marginalized in multinational states would be susceptible to it:

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<sup>60</sup> Jürgen Elvert. *Mitteleuropa!: deutsche Pläne zur europäischen Neuordnung* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag 1999), 23.

<sup>61</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 2004), 226.

Yet in a century which naively assumed that virtually all people were nations there was hardly anything left to the oppressed peoples of Austria-Hungary, Czarist Russia, or the Balkan countries, where no conditions existed for the western national trinity of people-territory-state, where frontiers had changed constantly for many centuries, and populations had been in a stage of more or less continuous migration. [...] Tribal nationalism grew out of this atmosphere of rootlessness. [...] Rootlessness was the true source of that “enlarged tribal consciousness” which actually meant that members of these peoples had no definitive home but felt at home wherever other members of their “tribe” happened to live.<sup>62</sup>

The Nazi puppet states of Croatia, Slovakia, Ukraine, and Hungary serve as the most prominent examples for how inspiring this “tribalism” proved for minor nations and their dreams of sovereignty, who welcomed the opportunity to rid themselves of their “rootlessness” enthusiastically. And yet Arendt extensively references Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, the Czech politician and founding father of Czechoslovakia, who sought to counter both Pan-Germanism and Russian Pan-Slavism with an alliance of minor nations in which national autonomy and diversity were not at odds with each other. The vision Masaryk proposed in his World War I pamphlet *The New Europe* in 1917, written from exile in St. Petersburg, is a direct response to radical Pan-German concepts of *Mitteleuropa*, next to which Friedrich Naumann appears rather moderate. Masaryk maintained that all artificial multiethnic empires such as the Habsburgs were doomed to fail because they were based on a minority’s rule over the majority, which lead to repressive homogenization. A federation of free independent states was the only viable alternative.<sup>63</sup> Both the Russian expansion at the cost of Poland, and the German exploration into the Middle East, as illustrated by the construction of the Berlin-Baghdad-Basra railway between 1903 and 1940, betrayed a colonialist drive that, he believed, was

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Garrigue Masaryk, *Das neue Europa – der Slavische Standpunkt* (Berlin: Verlag Volk und Welt, 1922), 45-48.

alien to the minor nations of Central Europe. He was outraged at the colonizer's reduction of these nations to mere "buffer states," that were only discussed in terms of their strategic importance against a monolithic opponent, be that Greater Russia or Greater Germany.<sup>64</sup> Masaryk suggested that a moderate Pan-Slavic nationalism based on literary and cultural reciprocity instead of political ideas could create the federation of minor states that the Habsburg monarchy had failed to be. And while such a federation would profess solidarity with other Slavic peoples, it would distinguish itself from Pan-Germanic ideas because it would not claim non-Germanic tribes as their servants or non-Germanic territory as its own.<sup>65</sup> Masaryk's belief that nations were "the most natural institutions of humanity" has to be seen in that light, and as such it later inspired the Czech dissident Milan Kundera in his outline of a "kidnapped" Central Europe, who maintained that giving back national sovereignty to the states of the region would repair the tragic consequence of an ill-fated Russian Pan-Slavism that was at the heart of bolshevism. Quite differently from Masaryk, however, Kundera associated *Mitteleuropa* with those forces that fought for more liberty and democracy in the multiethnic Habsburg Empire, only to be overpowered by an "arrogant Pan-Germanism" and internal conflicts.<sup>66</sup>

It is rather ironic that in its proto-fascist connotation, "Mitteleuropa" still remains strongly linked to Friedrich Naumann's political pamphlet from 1915 of the same title, since Naumann's ideas came much closer to Masaryk than to either List, Ratzel or Hasse.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>66</sup> Milan Kundera, "The Tragedy of Central Europe," trans. Edmund White, *The New York Review of Books*, Volume 31, Number 7, April 26 (1984): 5.

In his book, which popularized the term across the region, the liberal pastor and member of the German Reichstag argued for an economic and cultural union of the Habsburg and German empires to restore peace and prosperity after the end of the First World War. Inspired by economic liberalism, but also Christian social values, Naumann also favored a confederate system in which all nationalities would be autonomous.<sup>67</sup> He never suggested the displacement of ethnic groups or large-scale annexation of territory, but rather advocated for diversity in cultural, linguistic and religious matters, and envisioned a tolerant German leadership in politics and economics. Curiously enough, Naumann's proposal, though clearly motivated by a German expansionist agenda, contained elements that seem to resonate with the claims espoused by Kundera and his contemporaries. His "Mitteleuropa" was not one of forced Germanization, but of cooperation and equality between the minor and major nations. He assigned social justice priority before economic and military profits: Mitteleuropa was to be "vielgegliedertes Bruderland, Verteidigungsbund, Wirtschaftsgebiet,"<sup>68</sup> in that order. It was also Naumann's intent to redeem the fallacies of Austria-Hungary: especially when it came to the tensions between the nationalities, a larger Central European collective identity should provide the link between the peoples that Kaiser worship and formal legal concessions had not achieved in the past. Under the guidance of German cultural leadership, a new transnational brotherhood was to be created that was willing to forget past conflicts and was able to rebuild the region, both economically and morally, after the end of the war: "Die schwerste Prüfung für die Doppelmonarchie liegt natürlich auch für die Zukunft nach

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<sup>67</sup> Bo Strath, "Mitteleuropa: From List to Naumann," *European Journal of Social Theory*, 2008 (11): 183.

<sup>68</sup> Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteleuropa*, 1915, 3.

dem Kriege in der Nationalitätsidee. [...] Der Krieg [wird] ein starker Lehrmeister und Erzieher zu Mäßigung national-partikularistischer Ansprüche sein.”<sup>69</sup> Throughout his treatise, Naumann demonstratively curbs the tendency towards an aggressive German nationalism. While German national pride is considered natural and necessary (“wir brauchen das“), it should not work to the detriment of other nations: “Indem wir unsere Nationalität hochhalten, wollen wir die ihrige mit in unseren Händen tragen.”<sup>70</sup> Unusual for his time, and in clear distinction of previous proponents of a Central European project under German auspices, he posited the equal humanity of the Slavic nations: “[...] auch die nichtgermanischen Bundesgenossen [haben] ein Lebensblut und [wollen] wissen wofür sie zu sterben bereit sind [...]”<sup>71</sup> While it would go too far to interpret Naumann as a visionary of a Central European civil society, his cautious rhetoric, as well as his keen awareness of the heterogeneity and the historical conflicts of the area, opposed Hitler’s *Lebensraum Ost* and distinguish themselves clearly from right wing German nationalism.<sup>72</sup> He observes a ‘fullness’ of the Central European space, which corresponds to the notion of *Mitteleuropa* as a repository of history in the writings of the Eastern European dissidents:

Um das Deutschtum herum wächst die Kultur von Mitteleuropa, es wächst der Typ des Menschen, der zwischen Franzosen, Italienern, Türken, Russen, Skandinaviern und Engländern die Mitte ist. Diesen Mitteleuropäer laßt uns suchen! Aber freilich haben wir es schwer, weil wir eben in Mitteleuropa sind, im Durchgangsland aller Völkerwanderungen, im Kampfland aller großen

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Bo Strath, “Mitteleuropa: From List to Naumann,” 181. Hannah Arendt sees Naumann’s *Mitteleuropa* as an economic, not a political project, much different from the Pan-Germans who were not interested in economics at all.



Geisterschlachten, im Gebiet der Religionskriege, der Nationalitätenkämpfe, der sich rastlos folgenden Wirtschaftsperioden, in einem Gebiet, dass keine innere Gemächlichkeit bieten und besitzen kann, weil es zu voll ist für bloßen Schematismus.<sup>73</sup>

Like Arendt, Naumann saw Central Europe as a space of constant migration, volatility and conflict, but believed that this complexity could be addressed “with optimism” and a humanist mindset: “[...] man [kann] ein Weltwirtschaftsgebiet nur mit einem gewissen Mass voll allgemeiner Humanität verwalten [...]”<sup>74</sup> He was certainly the first of the German *Mitteleuropa* theorists who foregrounded the cultural implications of such a union and pointed to the necessity of interethnic peace in order to rebuild Europe after 1918. The fact that his treatise became a bestseller and was translated into French and English before the end of the war doubtlessly owes its part to the humanistic appeal with which he polished his geopolitical considerations. Even though Naumann places his Central Europe in the near future, his book clearly lacks the grandiose futurisms of the Pan-Germans. When instances of future projections appear, they are scenes of intercultural understanding and congeniality. One of them is a fictional visit to Prague, which he imagined as the capital for the economic union of Central Europe, ten years into the future. The local “Central European representative” paints a picture of international exchange: “Er zeigt mir seinen schönen Neubau, sagt: als wir kamen, dachten wir, wir hätten nichts zu tun, und nun wächst es an allen Wänden in die Höhe! [...] Von allen Seiten kommen die Leute zu uns, aus Ungarn, aus Graz, von Mannheim, von Altona, auch von...und von...”<sup>75</sup> The new Central European union is also a place of linguistic

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 252.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 252-253.

tolerance, for the German administrators are learning Czech in order to communicate better with the local farmers. At some point, Naumann pictures Central Europe as a bustling biotope of cultures, thus turning the contrived bio-scientific diction of the Pangermans on its head:

Es lebt alles wie ein ungeheurer Wald mit Hochwald und Unterholz, mit Laubbestand und Tannenforst und tausend kleine Sträuchern und Blumen. Es ist wie ein See, in dem alle Arten von Fischen sich tummeln. Und nirgends sind feste Gräben und Abgrenzungen. Alles fließt, drängt und schiebt durcheinander, säuselt und schreit, bittet und schilt, betet und rechnet.<sup>76</sup>

Despite of these elements of utopianism in Naumann's book, he certainly considered himself a political pragmatist and was aware of movements in the alliance where this was not the case. While he strongly believed in the necessity of a Prussian-Habsburg alliance, he lamented the Austrian lethargy and lack of organization. Also, he observed that the Austrian view of *Mitteleuropa* was marked by political pessimism and "artificial melancholy." It is crucial that he identified these tendencies as coming from a destructive literary culture, which had hijacked the political imagination to a considerable extent:

Es gibt so eine besondere Art von Wiener Staatskritik, die sich interessant und gehaltvoll vorkommt, wenn sie trübe Bilder malt. [...] Diese künstliche Melancholie ist im Grunde genommen etwas Literarisches und hat mit Politik sehr wenig zu tun, aber von der Außenwelt wird solchen Müdigkeitsdichtungen ein politischer Wert beigelegt. [...] Wenn Österreich seine pessimistischen Anwandlungen als das erkennt, was sie sind, nämlich Ästhetikpolitik, dann wird es sofort auch draußen als gesunder eingeschätzt werden. Wir glauben an euch, glaubt ihr an euch selber!<sup>77</sup>

By juxtaposing the Prussian perception of *Mitteleuropa* as Realpolitik to the Habsburg "Ästhetikpolitik," Naumann summarized the fundamental division of the discourse that has remained in place until the present day. The persistence of this split became apparent

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 26-27.

in the 1980s, when puzzled West German intellectuals questioned why Eastern European dissidents would adopt such a compromised German idea in a plea for freedom.<sup>78</sup> In spite of the fact that many of the most extreme Pan-Germans came from Austria, the Empire's demographic make-up and literary sensibility had already contributed to an alternative imaginary of *Mitteleuropa* at the time that Naumann presented his ideas.

Nowhere did this become more apparent than in the encounters between Austrian writers and German (geo)politicians: Hugo von Hofmannsthal was first delighted by Naumann's publication, believing he had captured the "spiritual universalism"<sup>79</sup> of Habsburg Austria, then disappointed, when he realized that the Empire's mediating role between its German and Slavic population would be eliminated in a Prussian-lead *Mitteleuropa*.<sup>80</sup> Stefan Zweig, one of the chief literary contributors to a specifically Habsburg view of *Mitteleuropa*, relates his acquaintance with Karl Haushofer in his memoir *Die Welt von gestern*, defending him clumsily against accusations of Nazi collaboration and admitting quite naively, that he had failed to recognize the political dimension of Haushofer's Geopolitik: "I honestly believed that it was concerned only with the play of forces in the co-operation of nations. [...] And Haushofer's summons to study the individual traits of the nations more closely, and to create a permanent educational apparatus on a scientific basis, appeared quite proper to me, for I conceived

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<sup>78</sup> See Walter Schmitz, "MITTELEUROPA – Landschaft und Diskurs," in '*Mitteleuropa*' *Geschichte eines transnationalen Diskurses im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Jacques Lajarrige, Walter Schmitz and Giusi Zanasi, Band I. Trilaterale Forschungskonferenz in der Villa Vigoni, Mai 2009 (Dresden: Thelem, 2011), 21-26.

<sup>79</sup> Hugo von Hofmannsthal elaborates on the "spiritual universalism" of Habsburg Austria as opposed to the confined German perspective in "Österreich im Spiegel seiner Dichtung," which he gave in 1916, a year after he had read Naumann's treatise. See footnote 29.

<sup>80</sup> Frederik Lindström, *Empire and Identity: Biographies of the Austrian State Problem in the Late Habsburg Empire* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 2008), 151.

such investigations as calculated to draw nations together.”<sup>81</sup> The intent towards an intercultural dialogue without hierarchy is precisely what distinguished the Austrian *Mitteleuropa* writers even from humanistically inclined German thinkers such as Naumann. This may be attributed to the fact that the Germans, as Naumann himself admits, had little hands-on experience with the east and its Slavic, which after all constituted the majority of Habsburg, population and territory. While he prides himself in having traveled Central Europe extensively, the collective German focus since the Enlightenment had been elsewhere:

Unsere Augen waren westlich gewendet. Wir studierten die Nationen älterer Kultur und haben viel von ihnen gelernt und bei ihnen gefunden, aber die werdenden kleineren Kulturen des Ostens waren uns nicht wichtig genug, schon weil man eher zu den romanischen Bildungssprachen ein Verhältnis hatte als zu den Sprachen der Mitträger unserer Waffen. Hier soll die neue, nach dem Krieg erwachsende Jugend es besser machen als wir Alten [...].<sup>82</sup>

Naumann’s focus on *Mitteleuropa* as a political project of the future was motivated by the uncertain present reality of war, which turned the region’s conflicted historical past merely as evidence for the necessity of the project. In this he resembled the Pan-German “tribalists” who, according to Arendt, eclipsed the complexity of the present and the historical past in favor of an overpowering futurism.<sup>83</sup> By contrast, Hofmannsthal’s and Zweig’s *Mitteleuropa* referred to a golden age of Habsburg rule which they perceived as irretrievably lost, and therefore imbued with the melancholy nostalgia that seemed so

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<sup>81</sup> Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 185.

<sup>82</sup> Naumann, *Mitteleuropa*, 101.

<sup>83</sup> Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 227. Arendt observes that tribalism, in contrast to historically conscious national chauvinism, “starts from non-existent pseudomystical elements which it proposes to realize fully in the future.” Also it “measure[s] a people, its past and present, by the yardstick of exalted inner qualities and inevitably rejects its visible existence, tradition, institutions and culture.”

decadent to Naumann. Much of Naumann's optimism can be attributed to the fact that he was writing at a time when the disastrous effects of the First World War were still to be revealed. He could not anticipate the profound caesura of the Second World War, which would not only obliterate the possibility of a Central European *Wirtschaftsgemeinschaft* for many decades to come, but also effectively destroyed the Austrian belief in *Mitteleuropa* as a spiritual community that Zweig and others still harbored before Hitler's rise to power.

It is in the light of these failures that the phenomenon of *Mitteleuropa*, whether in the context of the interwar literature in Austria or the dissident debate of the 1980s, was conceived as a retrospective utopia or myth both by its critics and enthusiasts. For postwar historians and political scientists, it came to connote a distortion, almost falsification of historical facts, while cultural and literary critics, who usually embrace the necessity of myth(s) for the construction of cultural identity, associated it more benevolently with compromised hopes and a failed visionary project. I contend that the questions asked about the idea of *Mitteleuropa* since its revitalization during the Cold War have been focusing on a number of heuristic fallacies, which reproduce the Austrian/German split as outlined above: Is it a real (political) or imaginary (literary) space? What is part of it and what isn't? Is it empirically verifiable from a number of different perspectives? This approach fails to grasp the relevance of the *Mitteleuropa* idea, at least in its Habsburg manifestation, as a community of the arts rather than nations. If, as has been suggested mostly by historians and political scientists, its arbitrary dimension renders it automatically irrelevant, then its numerous turns and reinterpretations by writers and intellectuals across the continent for more than a century beg some

explanation. As has already been indicated, the adherents of a literary *Mitteleuropa* have always sought to separate it from political strategies, not because they did not want to address political conditions, but because its ideological instrumentalization by the Pan-Germans had been so pervasive. This is why they limited *Mitteleuropa* to a cultural milieu and the poetics that arose from it. While geopolitical treatises of *Mitteleuropa* have preceded the literary discourse in Austria as well, most famously the strategic elaborations of Prince Klemens von Metternich, the literary responses by prominent Austrian authors such as Hugo v. Hofmannsthal, Stefan Zweig, Robert Musil and Joseph Roth, were conceived as counter-images or at least expansions to the strategic appropriations of that space. They critiqued the vested interests of the two German empires in those treatises, even if acknowledging the significant differences between the anti-liberalist tendencies of Metternich, and the propositions for a unified *Mitteleuropa* of the neoliberal pastor Naumann.

### **The Habsburg Myth**

I would like to subject the Austrian *Mitteleuropa* authors to a close reading within the framework of what the Italian critic Claudio Magris has called the “Habsburg myth.” In his book, *The Habsburg Myth in Austrian Literature* (1962), Magris analyzed how the “Habsburg myth,” i.e. an idealized and nostalgic vision of the Habsburg reign, was consistently sustained in Austrian literature for over more than a century, from 1806 until the 1940s. It was through Magris that the idea of *Mitteleuropa* was popularized as a longing for the Habsburg past across Europe, and I believe that Magris’ observations reveal certain paradigms in *Mitteleuropa* criticism that are useful for understanding the influence of a *Mitteleuropa* legacy on authors writing after 1945. Because the

*Mitteleuropa* discussion of the 1980s referred repeatedly to the literature of the Habsburg period, Magris' dictum of the "Habsburg myth" was taken up again, even though it contained a number of incomplete assumptions, which eventually proved relevant for the dissident debate.<sup>84</sup>

Throughout his book, Magris uses the "Habsburg myth" synonymously with two topographical terms borrowed from Robert Musil's *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* and Stefan Zweig's *Die Welt von gestern* respectively: "Kakanien" and "Mitteleuropa." The "myth" Magris intends to debunk is characterized by a skewed and idealized evocation of the old Empire that breaks down to three main components or "motifs:" 1) the myth of transnational togetherness and harmonious plurality amongst the many nationalities in the Empire, 2) the influence of the bureaucratic mentality on everyday life and 3) an all-pervading hedonism ("Gemütlichkeit") which puts distraction and sensual pleasures at the center of social interactions. Borrowing specifically from the context of Musil's and Zweig's novels, thus suggesting that they convey similar messages is rather misleading, since Musil's "Kakania" is a political caricature of the Empire, while Zweig's *Mitteleuropa*, which is based on a view of Habsburg as a community of *belles lettres*, takes itself quite seriously. But I will delve into these distinctions shortly. Another problem arises from Magris' imprecise concept of myth. Even though he defines myth as a narrative grown out of fictional and factual components, a "Vermengung echter

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<sup>84</sup> Exceptions to the general agreement are Peter Plener, "Mythos und Jahrhundertdämmerung. Zu Büchern von Claudio Magris und Jens Malte Fischer", *Kakanien Revisited*, 1-4. Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014 at <http://www.kakanien-revisited.at/rez/PPlener1.pdf>, as well as Sven Achelpohl, "Eine Welt von gestern –ein Mythos von Heute? Über Claudio Magris *Der habsburgerische Mythos in der österreichischen Literatur*," *Rezensionsforum Literaturkritik*. Nr.6, Juni 2001, 3. Jahrgang. Accessed on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 2014 at [http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez\\_id=3725](http://www.literaturkritik.de/public/rezension.php?rez_id=3725).

Verherrlichung realer Werte mit einer Entstellung und märchenartigen Idealisierung der Welt,”<sup>85</sup> his reading of texts rather suggests a distorted representation of the past, and assign little importance to the critical components which have inspired the dissident debate of the 1980s. This can be attributed to the fact that Magris traces the roots of the “Habsburg myth” back to a literary tradition of patriotic Austrian “Heimatliteratur” and plays down the fact that some of the authors he mentions are either well known for their explicit lack of patriotic feeling (e.g. Karl Kraus) or for exposing the darker aspects (Robert Musil, Joseph Roth) of their “Heimat.” Magris does not distinguish between the overtly idealizing works of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, which were criticized by Hermann Broch for their aestheticism and ahistoricity,<sup>86</sup> and the social criticism of Arthur Schnitzler, which are quite different in their observations and conclusions, even if they come from the same liberal bourgeois milieu. While the downfall of this specific milieu, which Magris explains briefly in his introduction, can be linked to the melancholy and nostalgic literary productions that accompanied its long defeat (“Untergangsliteratur” one might want to call it), it seems precipitated to assume that they were merely lamenting the loss of an illusion – or alternatively, trying to uphold the illusion itself. There is a long way from “Heimatliteratur” to Karl Kraus, though these two Viennese phenomena certainly exist in a dynamic relationship to each other. Figures like Kraus, but also Roth and Musil can be grouped among the “cultural critics”<sup>87</sup> of the Empire, while the same can be argued much less convincingly for Hofmannsthal or Zweig. In his seminal study

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<sup>85</sup> Magris, *Der habsburgerische Mythos in der österreichischen Literatur*, 16.

<sup>86</sup> Hermann Broch, *Hofmannsthal und seine Zeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001) [first published in 1948]

<sup>87</sup> William M. Johnston, *The Austrian Mind* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 3.



of Austrian intellectual history, William Johnston juxtaposes Zweig's nostalgia to the satirical and gloomy premonitions of the latter two writers, also emphasizing that their fierce skepticism (he calls them "disillusionists") was not a common phenomenon, in spite of the "gay apocalypse" postulated by Broch.<sup>88</sup>

By pointing out the complexities of Habsburg imaginaries in Musil and Roth, I propose a different approach to the phenomenon as it is described by Magris. The first would be to acknowledge literature's idiosyncratic relationship to myth, as well as myth's function in the reproduction of social realities. As Stathis Gourgouris has observed: "Mythical aspects of a social realm often lead one to consider the literary processes whereby societies produce images of themselves and their world, even if they don't quite manage to conceptualize this process with literature as such."<sup>89</sup> Literature can theorize the world and thus opens up myth's new meaning, freeing it from "antique presuppositions and from various late-twentieth century attempt to relegate it to a blind mechanism of identity reproduction."<sup>90</sup>

It is my contention that the interplay between longing and rejection that Magris observes, as well as the awareness of loss, are in fact more indicative of nostalgia.<sup>91</sup> If the authors who came of age before 1918 demonstrate a tormented relationship to the past

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>89</sup> Stathis Gourgouris, *Does Literature Think?* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), (xvi).

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., (xix).

<sup>91</sup> The term "nostalgia" does not appear a single time in Magris' study, though his descriptions are highly suggestive of it: he talks about the "Verwandlungsspiel" of memory, the "mourning" ("Nachtrauer") for an illusion, a "homesickness," ("Heimweh") for a certain cultural atmosphere, and a belief in decency that is marked by "naïve dedication and sarcastic tenderness" ("naive [...] Hingabe und ironische [...] Zärtlichkeit").

(“quälende Bindung an die Vergangenheit”<sup>92</sup>) then the creation of a retrospective utopia might not be as easy as Magris suggests. Magris’ readings of stereotypical Habsburg rituals, human types and sites, be it the Austrian bureaucrat or the Viennese pub, corresponds more to trivial myth in the sense of Roland Barthes’ *Mythologies*. The “tone” Magris attributes to the literary Habsburg imagination matches Barthes’ understanding of myth as a language and system of signs.<sup>93</sup> Magris’ literary analyses, however, do not really “demystify” in the professed intention of Barthes, because they fail to juxtapose historical facts with the “suggestive distortion” (“suggestive Verfremdung”) of the literary texts in question. What then, do we gain from the concept of nostalgia? Svetlana Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia, restorative and reflective: “Restorative nostalgia manifests itself in total reconstructions of moments of the past, while reflective nostalgia lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place in another time.”<sup>94</sup> The most prominent authors Magris mentions, including Zweig, Musil, Roth, and Schnitzler, do not display, in spite of their nostalgic tendencies, any traits connected to the heritage of patriotic literature (restorative nostalgia being typically used by nationalists), but illustrate instead a significant amount of critical awareness that Boym finds characteristic of reflective nostalgia:

Reflective nostalgia does not pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home, it is ‘enamored with distance, not of the referent itself.’ This type of nostalgia is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary. Nostalgics of the second type are aware of

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<sup>92</sup> Magris, *Der hasbburgerische Mythos*, 9.

<sup>93</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: Wang and Hill, 1957), 11.

<sup>94</sup> Svetlana Boym. *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 41.

the gap between identity and resemblance, the home is in ruins, or to the contrary, has just been renovated and gentrified beyond recognition.<sup>95</sup>

If reflective nostalgia, according to Boym, relies on the irretrievability of the past, this explains why the most intensely ‘myth-producing’ authors, are those that write about the Empire after it has already vanished from the political map – Musil’s *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* was published in 1931/32, Joseph Roth’s ‘Habsburg trilogy’ (*Radetzky marsch*, *Die Büste des Kaisers* and *Die Kapuzinergruft*) between 1932 and 1938, and Stefan Zweig’s autobiographical novel *Die Welt von gestern* appeared in 1942. Even a cursory textual analysis of those novels reveals rather quickly that reflective nostalgia is a much more suitable term for the imaginary processes that take place in them. I do not think it is necessary to discard the category of myth altogether, since cultural myths play an important part in the construction of collective national memories, of which *Mitteleuropa* is one expression. Instead, I would like to propose a focus on the trajectories of myth rather than debate its validity. As Boym concedes: “Cultural myths [...] are not lies but rather shared assumptions that help to naturalize history and make it livable, providing the daily glue of common intelligibility.”<sup>96</sup>

In this respect, I believe that Jan Assman’s observations on the driving forces behind myth are useful for supplementing Boym’s theory of nostalgia. Assman establishes an interesting connection between myth and collective memory: Conceiving of myth as a narrative recurrence to the past, which serves to explicate the present and future, he specifies two functions, one of them “foundational” (“fundierend”) the other

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 54.

one “counter-present” (“kontrapräsentisch”).<sup>97</sup> The first function connects the present moment to a past history that endows it with a meaningful, pre-ordained and unchangeable structure. The “counter-present” function of myth emerges out of present experiences of lack (“Defizienzerfahrungen”), highlighting that which is missing or lost, or has been relegated to the margins.<sup>98</sup> Against the canvas of the past, the present appears to be ruptured and imperfect – this is exactly the function of myth that Magris perceives in the (post) Habsburg writers. According to Assman, the “counter-present” myths are occurring in times of transition, when social and political changes are under way. Both functions, however, do not exclude each other, this is why he places the emphasis on the dynamics behind the myth’s application, or its “mythomotorics” (“Mythomotorik”) which can shift in accordance with outside influences. In the event of an extreme collectively experienced loss, a counter-present mythomotorics may lapse into revolution, since the past is perceived as a political utopia that needs to be achieved by way of struggle and sacrifice. In this case, memory turns into expectation, attaining an almost prophetic character.<sup>99</sup>

The Habsburg writers after 1918 already supersede the counter-present tendencies, and those following in their footsteps one or two generations later, both in Austria and its former Slavic provinces, construct utopian and dystopian visions of *Mitteleuropa* as a reaction to extreme “deficiencies” in their environment. These authors recur to a

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<sup>97</sup> Jan Assman, “Mythomotorik der Erinnerung – Fundierende und kontrapräsentische Erinnerung,” in *Texte zur modernen Mythentheorie*, ed. Wilfried Barner, Anke Detken and Jörg Wesche (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2003), 280.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

*Mittleuropa* poetics as a reaction to the recent traumatic destruction wreaked by fascism and mass murder, and most importantly, the pervasive taboo of its critical discussion. The two representative literatures I chose for this purpose, and which I will examine more thoroughly in the chapters to follow are those of the Second Austrian Republic and Socialist Yugoslavia. Both use the legacy of the Habsburg past to deal with more recent experiences that cannot be discussed freely and publicly, and as neutral territories following the Second World War (with Austria's commitment to neutrality in the *Staatsvertrag* of 1955, and Yugoslavia's leadership in the non-aligned movement) they are exempt from the direct repercussions of the Cold War. Due to the similar way in which uncomfortable aspects of memory were edited, though not directly repressed in both countries, the literary reflection on *Mittleuropa*, through which both countries were historically connected, served as an inconspicuous outlet for alternative truths. These postwar authors follow up on the cultural criticism and humanist utopia that can already be detected in the writings of Musil, Roth and others. Theirs is a process of remembering through the deconstruction of certain cultural myths and the deliberate appropriation of others.

Given the fact that the first myth Magris intends to expose is that of the harmonious *convivance* of the Habsburg peoples, one of the larger omissions in Magris' "Habsburg myth" is the lack of authors outside the German-speaking sphere, thus leaving out a major aspect of the *Mittleuropa* debate as it resurfaced later. Even though Magris concedes that "parallels" to the construction of a mythical *Mittleuropa* can be found in writers from the former Habsburg periphery, such as the authors Italo Svevo, Bruno Schulz, Miroslav Krleža and Ivo Andrić, all respectively writing in their regional

languages, he assigns a model function to the role of German-Austrian literature. Somewhat confusingly, he recognizes particularly the Slavic and Jewish components of the “Völkermix” as defining for a distinctive «Habsburg Humanitas», but nevertheless maintains that a majority of them produced literary works in German.<sup>100</sup> This is of course a gross misrepresentation – except for the German-speaking Jews, and a few ‘transplanted’ German language writers like Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Ödön von Horvath, and perhaps Gregor von Rezzori (all of whom spent extended periods in areas where the majority of the population spoke other languages), many of those who were rediscovered in the wake of a new *Mitteleuropa* debate roughly twenty years after the publication of Magris’ book were writing in minor languages. Magris’ oversight was symptomatic for his time, but testifies even more to the radical changes in reception of writers from the (former) Habsburg margin beginning in the 1970s in Western European countries. Joining in the rediscovery of the minor nations of Central Europe, Magris himself began promoting such ‘minority writers’ and actively contributed to the literary construction of *Mitteleuropa* with his own works of ‘myth-building’ essays and fiction from the 1980s on.<sup>101</sup>

The acknowledgement of a *Mitteleuropa* of the margins was also by the Austrian critic Karl-Markus Gauß, who like Magris rejected the representation of *Mitteleuropa* as a happy multiethnic family, but claimed that it was constructed by German-Austrian conservatives in the postwar period, not by the Jewish Austrian writes of the interwar

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<sup>100</sup> Magris, *Der habsburgerische Mythos*, 14.

<sup>101</sup> See for instance Magris’s books *Danubio* (1986), *Trieste: un’identità di frontier* (1983) or *Un altro mare* (1991). All three books evoke the multiethnic past of the Habsburg Empire through the exploration of certain spatial hybrid zones.

years: his essay collections *Die Vernichtung Mitteleuropas* (1991) and *Tinte ist bitter. Literarische Portraits aus Barbaropa* (1988) contest the interpretation of Central Europe as a project of restorative nostalgia and instead claim that the ‘real’ Central Europe is quintessentially defined not by its center (the dominant culture around Vienna) but its margins, be that the geographical outskirts of the Habsburg empire or a qualitative marginality found in the writings of its ethnic minorities, cultural misfits and dissidents.<sup>102</sup> This shift in perspective countered the appropriation of *Mitteleuropa* by reactionary institutions under the guise of a fashionable “larger Austria” (“größeres Österreich”) in the postwar era, whereby the true legacy of the region, its plurality and subversive tendencies, but also the fascist past that ruptured it were conveniently overlooked. Gauß was specifically referring to the hypocrisy with which writers who were persecuted and expelled from Austria in 1938 were now lauded by the same institutions and functionaries that refused to acknowledge their cultural contribution when they returned to their postwar homeland.<sup>103</sup> With a similar interest in ‘alternative’ visions of *Mitteleuropa*, several studies have been undertaken since the early 1990s to examine the former dual monarchy through the eyes of the postcolonial critic.<sup>104</sup> Though it has been generally agreed that Orientalist criteria as laid out in Edward Said’s

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<sup>102</sup> This claim was made in similar form by Joseph Roth, whom Gauß admires as one of the representatives of his ‘alternative’ *Mitteleuropa*.

<sup>103</sup> Karl Markus Gauß, *Tinte ist bitter. Literarische Portraits aus Barbaropa* (Klagenfurt: Wieser, 1989).

<sup>104</sup> See Johannes Feichtinger, Mority Csaky and Ursula Prutsch, ed., *Habsburg postcolonial. Machtstrukturen und kollektives Gedächtnis* (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2003), and Wolfgang Müller Funk, Frank Plener and Clemens Ruthner, ed., *Kakanien revisited. Das Eigene und das Fremde (in) der österreichisch-ungarischen Monarchie* (Tübingen: A. Francke, 2002), as well as the corresponding online journal at [www.kakanien.ac.at/](http://www.kakanien.ac.at/).

*Orientalism*, cannot be applied to the specific historical situation in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, since they are modeled after British and French examples, the intricate power relations between center and periphery by which this territory was characterized still provided for a quasi-colonialist cultural dynamic.<sup>105</sup> The unrest and dissatisfaction resulting from it is reflected through numerous transgressive and anti-hegemonic tendencies in writings from the late period of the Empire, in which Orientalist imaginaries in fiction were consistently employed to attack practices of cultural colonialism and centralist rule, and to point to ruptures in the merry canvas of Habsburg society.<sup>106</sup>

One of the authors who deconstructs the trivial myth of Habsburg everyday life through satirical interventions is Robert Musil. In his novel *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, Musil paints a pervasive portrait of the pre-1914 apocalyptic Zeitgeist of interwar Austria through the interplay of tragi-comical Habsburg ‘types’ (Ulrich, the free-floating bourgeois and urban mystic; Arnheim, the capitalist and industrialist; Clarisse, the Nietzsche-enthusiast etc.). Musil’s lack of historical contextualization and narrative cohesion – the impressionistic, referential, and playful character of the essayistic vignettes, along with the refusal to commit to one clear political agenda – are interpreted by Magris as typical traits of the Habsburg myth writers, whom he deems conservative and socially lethargic.<sup>107</sup> Against the accusation of political apathy, it is curious that several of the chapters in Musil’s *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* discuss the Habsburg

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<sup>105</sup> Robert Lemon, *Imperial Messages: Orientalism as Self-Critique in the Habsburg Fin de Siècle* (New York: Camden House, 2011).

<sup>106</sup> Robert Lemon analyzes writings by Kafka, Musil, Hofmannsthal to that end.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, (286-87).



“Nationalitätenfrage,” which was certainly one of the most politicized discourses in the final decades of the Empire, capturing the situation with sharp witticism and in all of its paradoxical madness. In the following paragraph, Musil describes the stark contrast between the persistent animosities among the k.u.k. ethnicities and the publicly endorsed myth of supranationalist harmony, by exposing the impulsive, irrational behavior the “Kakanier” assume in their narrow-minded nationalisms:

Die Menschen dort [in Kakanien] hatten einander recht gern; sie schlugen sich zwar die Köpfe ein und bespionierten einander, aber das taten sie nur aus Rücksichten höherer Kultur, wie es ja auch sonst vorkommt, dass ein Mensch, der unter vier Augen einer Fliege nicht weh tun mag, unter dem Bild des Gekreuzigten im Richtsaal einen Menschen zum Tode verurteilt. Und man darf wohl sagen: Jedesmal, wenn ihre höheren Ichs eine Pause machten, atmeten die Kakanier auf und fühlten sich als brave Eßwerkzeuge, zu denen sie gleich allen Menschen geschaffen waren, sehr erstaunt über ihre Erfahrungen als Werkzeuge der Geschichte.<sup>108</sup>

The difference between public and private persona, between particularist interests and the simple humanity of an individual that Musil sardonically captures here is part of a general schism that runs through the monarchy as a whole. Already early on in the novel, Musil suggests that the condition of “Kakania” is one of schizophrenia, to be torn between a plethora of contradictions, along with the repeated failure to balance them out: “Mann handelte in diesem Land [...] immer anders als man dachte, oder dachte anders als man handelte.<sup>109</sup>” One of these contradictions is the tension between center and periphery, or between the ruling Austro-Germans and the numerous minorities. But instead of confirming these dichotomies (which would mean confirming the myth) by placing the blame on German feelings of supremacy alone, he points to the absurd, lethargic

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<sup>108</sup> Robert Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften, Roman, Erstes und zweites Buch* (Reinbek: Rowohlt Verlag, 2009), 529-530.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

administrative structure of “Kakania,” which, shows how the formal attempts of equality lead to inequality for all and turn even the German elite into victims. While the German Austrians are far from being exculpated from their role as main oppressors in Musil’s novel, the dynamics behind this role are exposed in a highly enlightening way:

[Die deutsche Nation] hatte in Kakanien eine besondere Rolle inne, denn sie hatte in ihrer Masse eigentlich immer nur das eine gewollt, nämlich dass der Staat stark sei. Sie hatte am längsten am Glauben festgehalten, daß die kakanische Geschichte doch einen Sinn haben müsse, und erst allmählich, als sie begriff, dass man in Kakanien als Hochverräter anfangen und als Minister enden, aber umgekehrt auch seine Ministerlaufbahn als Hochverräter fortsetzen könne, begann auch sie sich als unterdrückte Nation zu fühlen[...]. [Und] zum Schluß gab es in Kakanien nur noch unterdrückte Nationen und einen obersten Kreis von Personen, die die eigentlichen Unterdrücker waren und sich maßlos von den Unterdrückten gefoppt und geplagt fühlten.<sup>110</sup>

Remarkably, this observation is included in a chapter told primarily from the perspective of Graf Leinsdorf, a character who represents the German-Austrian aristocracy, and who, even though he repeatedly refers to himself as “Realpolitiker” has very little knowledge of the actual problems in the provinces and the demands of the minorities who inhabit them. In many ways, Leinsdorf can be considered a caricature of Naumann, for in spite of his privileged position, he is wary of the German nationalist tendencies that are resurging in the Empire, in fact all nationalist struggles. Naumann had cautioned against the ideological utilization of history, which he considered the major obstacle towards building a Central Europe of the future. After the war, Central Europe should be lead by those who “nach übermenschlichen blutigen Kämpfen noch mehr an die Zukunft glauben als an die Vergangenheit. Mit griesgrämiger Ahnenverehrung kommt man allein nicht ans

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 515.

Ziel.”<sup>111</sup> Musil illustrates the extent to which this obsession with history disrupts daily life in the following vignette:

So ereignete sich das Merkwürdige und vielleicht doch noch nicht richtig Gewürdigte, daß Menschen, die irgendeine ganz gewöhnliche Angelegenheit miteinander zu erledigen hatten, wie die Errichtung einer Schule oder die Besetzung eines Bahnhofsvorstandpostens, dabei auf das Jahr 1600 oder 400 zu sprechen kamen, darüber stritten welcher Bewerber vorzuziehen sei, [...] und daß diese Auseinandersetzungen mit jenen Vorstellungen von Edelsinn und Schurkerei, Heimat, Treue und Männerkraft ausstatteten, die ungefähr der überall vorherrschenden Art der Belesenheit entsprechen.<sup>112</sup>

What is particularly interesting about this passage is that the official construction of a collective multiethnic myth is juxtaposed to antagonistic literary narratives that are busy creating separatist counter-myths. The above-mentioned erudition (“Belesenheit”) of the individual minorities is acquired through the reception of nationally conscious writings and their mythical lessons of justice and injustice, homeland and loyalty. The clash between everyday matters (“gewöhnliche Angelegenheit”) and age-old, sacralized claims illustrates the development of modern nationalism with its bombastic vocabulary and inflated, sometimes outright invented references to past greatness.<sup>113</sup>

Another writer who has been discussed under the premises of a counter-colonialist poetics is the Galician author Joseph Roth, who had famously declared that “the nature of the Empire was located in its periphery,”<sup>114</sup> not in its center Vienna. Roth’s literary and personal development is full of stark contrasts: born to a Hassidic Jewish

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<sup>111</sup> Naumann, *Mitteleuropa*, 59.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 514.

<sup>113</sup> See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>114</sup> “Das Wesen Österreichs ist nicht Zentrum, sondern Peripherie,” in Joseph Roth, *Die Kapuzinergruft* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1967), 15.

family in the Galician shtetl of Brody and educated partly in Lemberg, Roth only joined the literary circles of the Viennese intellectual elite relatively late and always remained aware of his position as the eastern outsider. Until 1920, he delighted in satirizing the monarchy as well as the emperor, and was actively engaged in the Austrian left; however, after a move to Berlin he became disillusioned with the ideal of the “German dream” which he had pursued his whole life, he became more nostalgic for the monarchy’s humanitarian achievements.<sup>115</sup> Magris assigns to him, as he does to Musil, a double function of supporting and criticizing the myth. Roth’s astute psychological insights, he argues, prevent him from succumbing to the ideological charms of the Habsburg myth, and turn him into one of the Empire’s admonishing prophets. Magris points out that Roth’s melancholy “Kaisertrilogie,” (*Radetzkyarsch*, 1932, *Die Büste des Kaisers*, 1934, *Die Kapuzinergruft*, 1938) describes not only the downfall of Austria but also foreshadows the European tragedy of the Second World War, he does not take into account Roth’s tendency towards satire and sarcasm and often succumbs to orientaling clichés: Roth’s complex position as a writer of the Habsburg periphery is reduced to vague references to the “Slavic soul” yearning for deserted forests, and in the uniform eastern landscape of his writing, the attributes “Slavic,” “Jewish” and “Semitic,” become seemingly interchangeable markers of exoticism.<sup>116</sup> This is symptomatic for the lack of sensibility that Western literary criticism displayed towards Habsburg minority writers

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<sup>115</sup> Bruce Thompson, “Schlecht kommen wir beide dabei nicht weg!': Joseph Roth's Satire on the Emperor Franz Joseph in His Novel *Radetzkyarsch*,” *Neophilologus*, Vol. 81 (2), (1997) : 253-267.

<sup>116</sup> See Magris, *Der habsburgerische Mythos*, 261: “Und der slawischen Seele entlehnt er [Roth] auch den Zauber seiner Phantasie, das was Slapater “die seltsame Sehnsucht, das Sehnen... nach verlassenem Wäldern, ein zärtlichkeits-und freudebedürftiges Empfinden: ein endloses Träumen ohne Grenzen” nannte.”

until the 1980s, which generally ignored the political impetus behind their work.<sup>117</sup> The case may be different with Habsburg Jews, since they commonly wrote in German and were therefore guaranteed more visibility – their specific role for a *Mitteleuropa* imaginary will be examined later on.

In Roth's writing, the Habsburg ideals of transculturalism are contrasted to a progressive decline of humanist values of which Hitler's fascism was the most extreme manifestation. It is in this context that Roth's Habsburg trilogy was taken up later by postwar writers such as Ingeborg Bachmann and Peter Handke to counter the silence of the Nazi period in the Second Austrian Republic. This is because rather than a simple idealization of the Empire, it offered up a model example of reflective nostalgia: interspersed with satirical portrayals of Habsburg institutions (such as the military and the bureaucratic state apparatus) Roth depicts a "political system in which Franz Joseph is as much a prisoner as his subjects."<sup>118</sup> The minor nations feature prominently throughout the trilogy: the Trotta family, whose story is told over the course of three generations, from the last years of the monarchy to the time of the Anschluss with Germany, has its roots in Slovenia: Lieutenant Joseph Trotta from Sipolje is elevated into nobility after saving the emperor's life at the battle of Solferino in 1859, after which he becomes estranged from his father, a disabled military veteran from a family of Slovenian farmers. After he discovers a revisionist passage about the battle in his son's schoolbook, Trotta leaves the army embittered and bars his son Franz from pursuing a military career, who then becomes a typical Habsburg government official (Bezirkshauptmann) in Bohemia.

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<sup>117</sup> Klaus Zeyringer, *Österreichische Literatur 1945-1998: Überblicke, Einschnitte, Wegmarken* (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1999).

<sup>118</sup> Bruce Thompson, "Joseph Roth's Satire," 257.

Franz's son, Carl Joseph von Trotta is then drawn back into the family's military occupation and their peripheral origins – he is killed at the beginning of the First World war at the Russian border in Galicia; his fascination with the eastern provinces, which in his perception have all blended into one, lead to his demise.

The myth of multiethnic harmony is approached from different angles by Roth. In the first installment of the trilogy, the patronizing, if not outright discriminating treatment of the Slavic minorities is juxtaposed to the monarchy's official affirmation of cultural diversity. In a passage situated in the middle of *Radetzky marsch* (1932) the Polish count Chojnicki unleashes a passionate diatribe against the dual monarchy to the naïve Carl Joseph, which is peppered with the most outrageous national stereotypes:

Ungläubig, spöttisch, furchtlos und ohne Bedenken pflegte Chojnicki zu sagen, der Kaiser sei ein gedankenloser Greis, die Regierung eine Bande von Trotteln, der Reichsrat eine Versammlung gutgläubiger und pathetischer Idioten, die staatlichen Behörden bestechlich, feige und faul. Die deutschen Österreicher waren Walzertänzer und Heurigensänger, die Ungarn stanken, die Tschechen waren geborene Stiefelputzer, die Ruthenen verkappte und verräterische Russen, die Kroaten und Slowenen, die er «Krowoten und Schlawiner» nannte, Bürstenbinder und Maronibrater, und die Polen, denen er ja selbst angehörte, Courmacher, Friseure und Modephotographen.<sup>119</sup>

There is only one logical result from this ethnic and moral chaos, which is the demise of the institution that created it: “Dieses Reich muss untergehen”. Carl Joseph von Trotta realizes the prophetic quality of Chojnitzky's words (“das finstere Gewicht der Prophezeiungen“), and soon thereafter, the beginning of the First World War is announced. But he is an exception - all the other aristocrats and military functionaries around him are happy to affirm the public credo: “[Sie] verstanden ihn nicht. Der Kaiser lebte noch. [...] Die Armee exerzierte und leuchtete in all ihren vorgeschriebenen Farben.

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<sup>119</sup> Roth, *Radetzky marsch*, 101.

Die Völker liebten die Dynastie und huldigten ihr in den verschiedensten Nationaltrachten.” It is significant to note that Roth positions his protagonist as an observer, not promoter of the Habsburg myth while also acknowledging those parts of the population who genuinely believe in it. It is not only the memory of the Empire itself that permeates the narratives of Roth’s Habsburg trilogy but also the practices that have made commemoration a crucial cultural habit and obligation: “Wenn einer aus der Schar der Irdischen abgelöst wurde, trat nicht sofort ein anderer an seine Stelle, um den Toten vergessen zu machen, sondern eine Lücke blieb, wo er fehlte [...] Alles was wuchs, brauchte viel Zeit, um zu wachsen, und alles was unterging, brauchte lange Zeit, um vergessen zu werden [...] man lebte dazumal von den Erinnerungen, wie man heutzutage lebt von der Fähigkeit, schnell und nachdrücklich zu vergessen.”<sup>120</sup> The shadow of a forgetful, technologized and bellicose modernity is always hovering in the background of Roth’s narrative, just as it will later in Zweig’s *The World of Yesterday*. The last part of the trilogy, *Die Kapuzinergruft*, published in 1938 by a Dutch publisher while Roth was already in exile due to the Nazi’s occupation of Austria, Roth presents a strikingly different protagonist from a distant line of the Trotta family who bears the name of the assassinated heir to the throne, Franz Ferdinand von Trotta. Quite fittingly, Franz Ferdinand brings the revolutionary potential dormant in the Slavic heritage of the Trottas back to life without rejecting the monarchy on the basis of arrogant particularisms, as Chojnitzky does. Fluent in both Slovenian and German, his closest friends a Galician Jew and his Slovenian cousin, he despises the gradual takeover of Vienna by German nationalists (whom he calls “Alpentrottel”) and is in a way the personification of “the

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<sup>120</sup> Roth as quoted in Magris, *Der habsburgerische Mythos*, 11.

tragic love of the provinces for Austria: tragic, because it was never reciprocated.”<sup>121</sup>

Franz Ferdinand, like his distant relative Carl Joseph, joins the army and is deployed to Galicia in 1914, which still displays the multitethnic Habsburg that is lost in the interwar years in Vienna. It is only in this location of concentrated hybridity, created by the intersection of linguistic, geographical and cultural elements that Franz Ferdinand feels at home:

[...] all dies war Heimat, stärker als nur ein Vaterland, weit und bunt, dennoch vertraut und Heimat: die kaiserliche und königliche Monarchie. Der Bezirkshauptmann Baron Grappik und der Oberst der Neuner Dragoner Földes, sie sprachen beide das gleiche näselnde ärarische Deutsch der besseren Stände, eine Sprache, hart und weich zugleich, als wären Slawen und Italiener die Gründer dieser Sprache, einer Sprache voller diskreter Ironie und voll graziöser Bereitschaft zur Harmlosigkeit, zum Plausch und sogar zum holden Unsinn. Es dauerte kaum eine Woche, und ich war in Zlotogrod so heimisch, wie ich es in Sipolje, in Müglitz, in Brünn und in unserem Café Wimmerl in der Josefstadt gewesen war.<sup>122</sup>

Roth's nostalgic evocation of the ethnic diversity in the Habsburg military is not diminished by the ruling class of the German Austrians since they are implicitly juxtaposed to the “Volksdeutsche” that were marching through the streets of Vienna at the time that he composed the novel. In spite of their occupation, there is nothing militaristic in their distinguished demeanor and melodic language, which betrays its influence by the surrounding Italians and Slavs, and is in its “graceful harmlessness” and “discrete irony” not congruent with the brutal German of the Nazis. Their presence in Zlotogrod is not perceived as an occupation, since they too are part of the “wild and colorful” canvas of national diversity, and the narrator approves of them in this respect.

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<sup>121</sup> Joseph Roth, *Die Kapuzinergruft* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuchverlag, 1967), 54. My translation.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.



His true sense of belonging, however, rests on a Central European map of the margins created through the coordinates of Zlotogrod in Galicia, Sipolje in Slovenia, Müglitz and Brünn in Moravia (Mohelnice/Brno in Czech) and the well-known Jewish quarter of Vienna, Josefstadt. Zlotogrod (literally meaning “city of gold” in Polish) is the only fictional name in this list, connoting a generic Galician town,<sup>123</sup> a Habsburg utopia of the periphery where all the empire’s nations come together one last time before they are forever swept away in the turmoil of the First World War. In a sense, the passage above is indicative of the push-and-pull dynamic that Roth experienced in the constant negotiation between disparate parts of his own identity as an eastern Jew, who struggled for recognition in the bourgeois circles of Vienna and Berlin for most of his life, but who nevertheless clung to a German ideal of education and culture.

### **The Jews of Central Europe**

In his embrace of a pluralistic identity, Roth is one of the most prominent examples for the influence that the “Habsburg myth” had specifically on the works of Jewish Austrian intellectuals which Magris also sees demonstrated in the writings of Franz Werfel and Stefan Zweig:

Diesen jüdischen Intellektuellen [...] die ein neues, von rassischem Hassgefühlen beherrschtes Europa entstehen sahen, erschien die alte habsburgerische Monarchie, mag sie auch nicht ganz frei von antisemitischem Makel gewesen sein, als ideale Heimat, die ein heiteres, sicheres Leben gewährleistete, darum entstammen ihrer Feder auch die bewegtesten, liebevollsten Erinnerungen an das Kaiserreich.<sup>124</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> There is only a town named Zlatogrod in south-central Romania, which used to be under Ottoman, not Habsburg rule. Roth uses Zlotogrod as a location in his novella *Das falsche Gewicht* as well, which was published shortly before (1937).

<sup>124</sup> Magris, *Der habsburgerische Mythos*, 267.

Much of this impression can be attributed to the atmosphere of Vienna at the turn of the century, which saw a flourishing of Austrian Jewish cultural production. Being able to move around freely in the multi-ethnic, multilingual and to a certain extent transnational space of pre-1914 Austria provided them with a grander vision of Europe than their German or French contemporaries could have possibly imagined.<sup>125</sup> Welcoming and synthesizing different ethnicities, languages, and talents, Vienna had become the vibrant urban heart of this creative community. As Zweig relates in *The World of Yesterday*:

Hospitable and endowed with a particular talent for receptivity, the city drew the most diverse forces to it, loosened, propitiated, and pacified them. It was sweet to live here, in this atmosphere of spiritual conciliation, and subconsciously every citizen became supernational, cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world.”<sup>126</sup>

Since they displayed the same talent for absorption as the city they lived in, the Viennese Jews became the main transmitters of its cosmopolitan environment – in fact, being uprooted and restless through their diasporic fate, it was their natural inclination to blend in: “Their longing for a homeland, for rest, for security, for friendliness, urges [sic] them to attach themselves passionately to the culture of the world around them.”<sup>127</sup> As passionate proponents of a “universal culture” and cosmopolitanism, the secular and bourgeois Viennese Jews are essentially responsible for the fact that being Austrian came to connote feeling European. The city, the nation and most of all its Jewish bourgeoisie

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<sup>125</sup> On the topic of Central European and Austrian Jewish identity, see Steven Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867-1938. A Cultural History* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and *Ibid.*, “The World of Yesterday Revisited. Nostalgia, Memory and the Jews of Fin-de-Siecle Vienna,” *Jewish Social Studies*, Volume 2, Issue 2, (1996): 37-53; Stefan H. Kaszyński, *Österreich und Mitteleuropa: kritische Seitenblicke auf die neuere österreichische Literatur* (Poznań: Uniwersytet, 1995); Robert S. Wistrich, *Laboratory for World Destruction: Germans and Jews in Central Europe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

<sup>126</sup> Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 13.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

thrived in this symbiotic relationship, whose repercussions extended beyond the borders of the adopted homeland: “They felt that their being Austrian was a mission to the world [...] much, if not most of all that Europe and America admire today as an expression of a new, rejuvenated Austrian culture [...] was created by the Viennese Jews.”<sup>128</sup> The shock that followed when this relationship was severed was experienced differently by Zweig and Roth. Sheltered in his upper-class intellectual milieu, Zweig did not feel affected by Austrian anti-Semitism, claiming that even Vienna’s outspokenly anti-Semitic mayor Karl Lueger did not cause much harm and that his university days were free of discrimination.<sup>129</sup> His decidedly anti-political and a-religious stance was the result of a nobility of spirit in the sense of Hofmannsthal, which placed the ideals of humanist enlightenment (brotherhood, tolerance, reason, justice) and art above all personal distinctions which he deemed narrow-minded and dividing. Roth (in spite of his own secularism) was skeptical towards assimilation, even though he supported Zweig’s idea of transnational Jews subscribing to a European universalism.<sup>130</sup> This is because he was much more familiar with the mores and challenges of the world of Eastern European orthodox Jewry than Zweig, in which persecution and discrimination were a regular experience. Towards the end of his life, it was increasingly this dark dimension of *Mitteleuropa* that colored Roth’s vision. A trip through Russia in 1927 moved him to compose his essay *The Wandering Jews*, where he does not only describe the plight of Eastern Jewry, but also attacks the Western European bourgeois society (in particular

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>130</sup> Matjaž Birk, “Vielleicht führen wir zwei verschiedene Sprachen...” *Zum Briefwechsel zwischen Joseph Roth und Stefan Zweig. Mit 21 bisher unveröffentlichten Briefen.* (Münster: LIT, 1997), 77.

assimilated Jews, but also anti-Semitic gentiles) which marginalizes and ridicules them. That he does share Zweig's ideals of tolerance and justice is expressed through his stark juxtaposition of Eastern (Jewish) dreams and West European reality, with the latter failing to live up to the expectations it has nourished through literature and history:

To the Eastern Jew, the West signifies freedom, justice, civilization, and the possibility to work and develop his talents. The West exports engineers, automobiles, books, and poems to the East. It sends propaganda soaps and hygiene, useful and elevating things, all of them beguiling and come-hitherish to the East. To the Eastern Jew, Germany, for example, remains the land of Goethe and Schiller, of the German poets, with whom every keen Jewish youth is far more conversant than our own swastika'd secondary school pupils.<sup>131</sup>

The definition of European values *ex negativo*, through polemic and accusation, is the hidden undercurrent of *The Wandering Jews*. While Zweig shows us how the European disaster managed to close in on all men of reason, in particular Jewish intellectuals, whom (as we shall see) he considers the ideal mediators, Roth tells us what the "Jewish situation" reveals about the decay of Europe. His chapter on Vienna in *The Wandering Jews* deals not with the assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie that was part and parcel of Zweig's way of life, but the poor Eastern European Jewish immigrants who find their way to the city out of dire need. He calls Leopoldstadt, the district with the highest concentration of "Ostjuden," a "sort of a voluntary ghetto."<sup>132</sup> The bridges that connect the second district to other parts of the city are not the spiritual interconnections that Zweig envisions; when mingling with the 'native' population, these types of Jews are considered intruders, not a leavening influence. Roth describes the living conditions and

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<sup>131</sup> Joseph Roth, *The Wandering Jews*, trans. Michael Hoffmann (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 6.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

occupations of these immigrants with a sharp eye for realism and social injustice. Little opportunity awaits the poor newcomers: “The two career alternatives are peddler or installment seller,”<sup>133</sup> and they do not only have to compete with the hostile Christian working class, but also amongst each other. To the middle and upper class visitors of coffeehouses, they are an amusement at best, as Roth describes with a mixture of sarcasm and bitterness:

At a certain stage of drunkenness, even Christians may be kind-hearted. One may set foot in little local bars and cafés on a Sunday without fear. One will be teased a little and called names, but it’s all in good part. The more humorous individuals will take away one’s basket and hide it, and generally drive the hawker to the brink of despair. But *nil desperandum!* These are nothing but expressions of the golden hearts of the Viennese. When it’s all done and dusted, he’ll be able to sell a picture postcard or two.<sup>134</sup>

It is this type of “good-natured” anti-Semitism, which contributes to the generation of stereotypes as much as overt loathing, for it glosses over inequalities with the same complacency that Zweig perceived as so charming. In a down-to-earth, paratactic style of writing, Roth disputes common prejudices which view the Eastern European Jew as a parasite by juxtaposing them to the truth: “You really can’t claim that the Eastern Jewish tailor ‘sucks on the marrow of the native population’ [...]. Eastern Jews are no magicians. Anything they may achieve cost them effort, sweat, hunger.”<sup>135</sup> Even more vehemently does he counter the stereotype of the dishonest Jew: “There are Eastern Jewish swindlers and crooks. Yes, I said it: crooks! But then I have heard there are Western European

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 65.

crooks, too.”<sup>136</sup> The indirect, euphemistic expression “I have heard” emphasizes how much ethnic stereotypes are spread through hearsay and how rarely the lives of the deriding and the derided intersect. Roth points us to the xenophobia, orientalism and social injustice hidden underneath the cover of good Austrian society. In this world, the Jews are not just an “Eastern” element in a geographical sense, but they are perceived as being “Eastern” with the connotation of alien, Asiatic, barbaric, and disruptive. How can these foreign elements ever take on the enlightening role of Austrian Jewry as described by Zweig’s vision of a bustling *Mitteleuropa*? For Roth, who asserts that nationality is an elitist invention of “Western European scholars,” the ideal transnational European to him is in fact the mobile, open-minded Eastern Jew:

Only in the East do people live who are unconcerned with their “nationality,” in the Western European sense. They speak several languages, are themselves the product of several generations of mixed marriages, and fatherland for them is whichever country happens to conscript them.<sup>137</sup>

The old Habsburg monarchy, Roth claims, gave the Western European thinkers “their best evidence of nationalism in action” and only failed because it was mismanaged: “In fact, if it had been at all well governed, it could just as easily provided evidence for the opposite.” Instead of being readily dismissed from the start, the vision of a pluralistic community here appears as a recent disappointment and loss. What prevails is the shadow side of modern European civilization that Freud had described so aptly in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*: The constant repression of natural drives leads to social phenomena of restlessness and frustration which find a welcome outlet in war and

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 15.

persecution.<sup>138</sup> It is on the same grounds that Roth rejects Zionism as only another participation in the injustices committed in the name of territory and supremacy: “Even if Jews reject Europe’s bad habits and customs, they aren’t quite able to do without them. [...] The European mark of Cain won’t wash off [...].”<sup>139</sup> In a gesture of counter-Orientalism, the myth of enlightened Europe is debunked, whose educated elite displays a moral barbarism that invalidates exactly those values of which it prides itself.

Because it reflected the essential antagonisms of Central Europe after 1945, the question of Jewish identity was eagerly taken up again by both the non-Jewish Kundera and the Jewish György Konrád, who each in their own way affirmed Zweig’s assertion, but also Roth’s bitterness. In “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” Kundera called the Central European Jews, the region’s “intellectual cement, a condensed version of its spirit, creators of its spiritual unity. That’s why I love the Jewish heritage and cling to it with as much passion and nostalgia as though it were my own.”<sup>140</sup> According to Kundera, the Central European people “represent the wrong side of this history; they are its victims and outsiders. Kundera’s vision of Europe, too, was a Europe of the margins, in spite of its provocative claim to ‘centrality,’ and the Jew as the time long ‘other’ figured perfectly as its model. The mourning for the loss of Europe as a cultural home, even in the form of a discarded utopia, appears in Zweig and Roth in the same way as in Milan Kundera’s essay on the “Tragedy of Central Europe,” which jumpstarted the dissident debate on Central Europe in 1984.

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<sup>138</sup> See Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (Vienna: Internationaler Psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1930).

<sup>139</sup> Roth, *The Wanderings Jews*, 19.

<sup>140</sup> Milan Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” 8.

The reception of Kundera's controversial essay perpetuated the dichotomy between politics and aesthetics that had already been postulated by Naumann in *Mitteleuropa* and continued by Magris through the "Habsburg myth." In spite of the repeated and explicit references made by the dissident authors of the 1980s to the literary legacy of the Habsburg Empire, the rediscovery of *Mitteleuropa* from its former periphery was interpreted as mere discussion of power politics, which is why a close reading of the literary layers contained in it, rather than a political manifesto (for new 'bloc building', for Czech independence etc.) is called for. Kundera's essay begins with an anecdote from the Hungarian revolution of 1956: he reports that, shortly before the destruction of the agency's office, the director of the Hungarian News Agency sent around a teletext announcing not only the Russian attack, but also added a martyr-like sentence which claimed that the Hungarian people were dying "for Hungary and for Europe." Kundera states that this dramatic gesture of European allegiance would not be understood in the West due to a general intellectual neglect and forgetfulness of the European 'east' ever since the former heartland was claimed by the wrong side of the political divide. The overcoming of this Central European "tragedy," its restitution in collective Western memory is his professed goal, but it can only be achieved through the transcending of ideological categories, and by recuperating the common cultural history that was eclipsed by them. What has solicited justified protest by many Russian dissidents is the fact that Kundera explicitly excludes Russia from a Central European community and claims that even writers like Aleksandar Solzhenitsyn and Anna Akhmatova who are struggling against the Soviet machinery of oppression cannot empathize with the sense of despair that Communist occupation has invoked in the



satellite states. Even more controversially, he sees Central Europe as “rooted in Roman Christianity,” and allots the Jews of the region the role of its cultural “ferment,” but excludes the influence of Orthodox Christianity as well as the legacy of the Ottoman Empire. Throughout the essay, Russia is constructed as the new ‘other’ that Europe is compelled to fear instead of its brothers in spirit, the occupied Central Europeans.<sup>141</sup> Ironically, the quasi-colonial structures of the Habsburg Empire picked up by recent research are projected onto the political situation of the 1980s, only with different agents – Soviet Russia takes on the role of oppressor that Vienna assumed in the satirical excerpts from Musil’s *Mann ohne Eigenschaften* quoted previously. Injustices under the Habsburg reign, as well as atrocities committed by Nazi Germany come second place next to the trope of enslavement through Communist Russia: “In an era of anti-colonialism, at the very moment the British empire and the French empire were crumbling, independent states of half of Europe were converted into colonial satrapies controlled from outside.”<sup>142</sup> Like Kundera, Miłosz joins in the process of orientalizing the Russian occupiers by calling their mentality “alien” and “barbaric” and their literature as “clinging to clichés [...], sterile and unattractive.”<sup>143</sup>

By claiming that to “a Hungarian, a Czech, a Pole” “the word ‘Europe’ does not

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<sup>141</sup> Kundera situates Russia as being intrinsically different and estranged from Europe (its “terrifying foreignness,” 4), in spite of many contact zones. Geographically remote, but also culturally incomprehensible, it evokes fascination but not allegiance. Instead of making a direct judgment, Kundera quotes the Polish writer Kazimierz Brandys and the sublime horror he detects in Russian writers like Gogol. These musings end with a generalizing statement: “I don’t know if it is worse than ours, but I do know it is different: Russia knows another (greater) dimension of disaster, another image of space (a space so immense entire nations are swallowed up in it), another sense of time (slow and patient), another way of laughing, living, and dying.”

<sup>142</sup> Miłosz, “Central European Attitudes,” 103.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*.

present a phenomenon of geography, but a spiritual notion synonymous with the word ‘West.’” Kundera turns Miłosz’s dismissal of geography quoted earlier into exactly the kind of (Western) Eurocentrism that the text presumably attacks. The defense of the region’s Western identity is defined by “what has been created by the mind,” and it is through arts, especially literature, that the preservation of “collective cultural memory” is assured.<sup>144</sup> Kundera’s essay contains a number of nostalgic evocations of the Habsburg empire in which the minor nations do not appear marginalized anymore: he cites the Czech historian Frantisek Palacky, who maintained that the existence of Austria-Hungary was necessary to abate Russian imperialist ambitions, and condones his vision of Central Europe, which succinctly sums up the “Habsburg myth:” “a family of equal nations, each of which – treating the others with mutual respect and secure in the protection of a strong unified state – would also cultivate its own individuality.”<sup>145</sup> The periphery, Kundera is quick to point out, had a crucial relationship to the cultural capital Vienna, “whose importance and originality make little sense unless they are seen against the background of the other countries and cities that together participated in, and contributed creatively to, the culture of Central Europe.”<sup>146</sup> As with the Austrian Jewish writers, it is the failure of the Habsburg supranational vision that is held responsible for the political divide of the continent:

The Austrian empire had the great opportunity of making Central Europe into a strong, unified state. But the Austrians, alas, were divided between an arrogant Pan-German nationalism and their own Central European mission. They did not succeed in building a federation of equal nations, and their failure has been the misfortune of

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<sup>144</sup> Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” 2.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

the whole of Europe. Dissatisfied, the other nations of Central Europe blew apart their empire in 1918, without realizing that, in spite of its inadequacies, it was irreplaceable. After the First World War, Central Europe was therefore transformed into a region of small, weak states, whose vulnerability ensured first Hitler's conquest and ultimately Stalin's triumph. Perhaps for this reason, in the European memory these countries always seem to be the source of dangerous trouble.<sup>147</sup>

The potential of Central Europe was ultimately crushed by a mix of German aggression, Austrian complacency, and Pan-Slavic sentimentality, Kundera concludes. What remains in the Cold War era is the hybridity of its inhabitants, a “tangle of national destinies,” as well as the dynamic nature of their habitat, “the great common situations that reassemble peoples, regroup them in ever new ways along the imaginary and ever-changing boundaries that mark a realm inhabited by the same memories, the same problems and conflicts, the same common tradition.”<sup>148</sup> The Central Europe Kundera wants to preserve is marked by a wide-spread distrust of historical master narratives, because its people have always lived with a sense of permanent endangerment and the necessity to fight for their own survival. At the current moment of Soviet occupation, however, their fate had attained a tragic dimension because of the stifling and control of their cultural production. For the small nations of Central Europe, the loss of culture equaled the loss of national identity. The West, on the other hand, had not noticed their disappearance because it had deliberately relegated cultural production to the back seat and replaced it with mass media in the age of global capitalism. Kundera is echoing Stefan Zweig’s appraisal of art as the sustenance of human life<sup>149</sup> when he once more positions culture against politics,

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>149</sup> See Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*, 20: “A Viennese who had no sense of art or who found no enjoyment of form was unthinkable in ‘good society.’ Even in the lower circles, the poorest drew

and the arts against journalism:

[T]he Central European revolts were not nourished by the newspapers, radio, or television—that is, by the "media." They were prepared, shaped, realized by novels, poetry, theater, cinema, historiography, literary reviews, popular comedy and cabaret, philosophical discussions—that is, by culture.<sup>150</sup>

Consequently, Kundera claims, like Miłosz and Konrad, that “Central Europe is not a state: it is a culture or a fate. Its borders are imaginary and must be drawn and redrawn with each new historical situation.”<sup>151</sup> What then, are the characteristics of Central European literature, on which this repeatedly evoked landscape of the culture rests? As Kundera suggests, it is skeptical, subversive, and aware of its own marginalized position. Because of this awareness, it “mocks grandeur and glory”<sup>152</sup> and displays a talent for gloomy prophecy – just like the Habsburg models it evokes. Kundera places Central European writing after the Soviet takeover in the lineage of critical Habsburg writers who were perceptible to the processes of delusion and disintegration in their environment:

It's enough to read the greatest Central European novels: in Hermann Broch's *The Sleepwalkers*, History appears as a process of gradual degradation of values; Robert Musil's *The Man without Qualities* paints a euphoric society which doesn't realize that tomorrow it will disappear; in Jaroslav Hašek's *The Good Soldier Schweik*, pretending to be an idiot becomes the last possible method for preserving one's freedom; the novelistic visions of Kafka speak to us of a world without memory, of a world that comes after historic time. All of this century's great Central European works of art, even up to our own day, can be understood as long meditations on the possible end of European humanity.<sup>153</sup>

The lack of historical memory, the decay of humanist values, and the reign of an

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a certain instinct for beauty out of the landscape and out of the merry human sphere into his life; one was not a real Viennese without this love for culture [...].”

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., 8.

irrational bureaucracy are all phenomena that Kundera reads as dystopian projections on the present Soviet occupation. By proclaiming the end of culture and the “tragedy of Central Europe,” he aligns himself with his Habsburg models, taking on the role of the gloomy prophet of an oppressive system that is doomed to fail. Another concept that Kundera borrows from many of the better-known *Mitteleuropa* writers (particularly Zweig, but also to some extent Roth and Musil) is the quasi-sacred obligation of the Central European intellectual to defend the arts against politics. He cites the case of Franz Werfel, who proposed the founding of a “World Academy of Poets and Thinkers” at a congress held in 1937 in order to fight the expanding “politicization and barbarization of the world.” Though Kundera admits that such a proposal seems naïve against the backdrop of the historical events that followed it, he maintains that it testifies to an actual need, now as then.<sup>154</sup> *Mitteleuropa*, then, is not only a cultural space and shared history; it is also a network of intellectuals that sustain it across time and space.

György Konrad’s response to Kundera openly subscribes to the utopian project of a Central European network of diverse thinkers, but is less divisive in its analysis of the European situation: as a Hungarian Jew who barely escaped camp deportation under the Nazi occupation of Hungary, his promotion of transnationalism and plurality is marked by a double experience of oppression. Even though he shares Kundera’s criticism of mass culture, he is clearly skeptical of separatist tendencies that might come out of ‘eastern’ emancipation. Whereas Kundera’s text has been read as a plea for national sovereignty (of the Czechs, the Poles and others), Konrad emphatically warns: “[...] being Central

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 9.

European means learning to keep our nationalism, our national egotism under control.”<sup>155</sup> Instead, a set of “moral and legal agreements” should be attained which will in turn “develop into more sensible Euronationalisms.”<sup>156</sup> Like Kundera, he maintains that peaceful coexistence can be reached more substantially through the arts than politics but corrects Kundera’s trope of tragedy by presenting Central Europe as a narrative with infinite potential: “[Central Europe] is not just a tragedy, but an epic which in time resolves all tragedies. It is a common past that remains open to the future, even though the present is hardly glowing.”<sup>157</sup> The collapse of time planes, which Konrad evokes here corresponds to Central Europe’s fractured, disorganized time as observed by Miłosz and Zweig earlier. Its centrifugal vortex pulls its marginal nations, now as in the past, constantly into the heat of historical turmoil, which explains why they eventually become ‘central’ for Europe’s self-understanding.

Konrad agrees with Kundera that in addition to the Iron Curtain in the East, the rise of global capitalism in the West has added another barrier to the acknowledgement of Central Europe’s citizens. Without its contested center, Europe is reduced to a mere commodity: “If there is no Central Europe, then there is no Europe. Then Europe is only a nostalgic spectacle for tourists, a monument of preservation, where stylish, good-quality articles can be bought reasonably.”<sup>158</sup> Konrad points out the long tradition of cultural essentialism in the region, “the myth of an essential East and essential West,” against

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<sup>155</sup> György Konrád, “Is the Dream of Central Europe Still Alive?” *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, Vol. 5 (1985): 109-120.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

which he holds the principle of individual human experience: “In fact neither one exist, because there are only individuals and peoples, with their own unique histories.”<sup>159</sup> Konrad counters this construction of binary oppositions, to which Kundera also succumbs with a defiant act of self-orientalization. Under the current circumstances, he provocatively suggests, Central Europeans have become Europe’s shameful “other:”

We are the needy relatives, we are the aborigines, we are the ones left behind-the backward, the stunted, the misshapen, the down-and-out, the moochers, parasites, con men, suckers. Sentimental, old-fashioned, childish, uninformed, troubled, melodramatic, devious, unpredictable, negligent. The ones who don't answer letters, the ones who miss the great opportunity, the hard drinkers, the babblers, the porch sitters, the deadline missers, the promise breakers, the braggarts, the immature, the monstrous, the undisciplined, the easily offended, the ones who insult each other to death but cannot break off relations. We are the maladjusted, the complainers intoxicated by failure.<sup>160</sup>

In his lethargy, belligerence, and his fondness of complaining, the Central European resembles the conflicted Habsburg type as exposed by Naumann and Musil, but Konrad also takes a firm stance against passive victimhood, embracing the inherent contradictions in the collective psyche of Central Europe: “Since we like to see ourselves as tragic, we cannot leave the existing state of things alone with oriental submissiveness.”<sup>161</sup> Konrad asserts that Central Europeans are victims against their will, and they are fighting this imposed victim status through a literature that is caught between irony and pathos, in which both the realization of powerlessness and the refusal to accept it are contained. This is picked up by Kundera as well, who maintains that the untenable political circumstances against which Central European authors write have to

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>160</sup> György Konrad, “Notes on Your Central Europe and Mine,” *Harper’s Magazine* (February 1989): 27-28.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 115.

lead to irony: “Humiliated national pride usually gives rise to illusions, to self-pity, and mythologies. Observing that, a Central European writer receives training in irony. [...] Irony finds nourishment in the present international set-up which is an offense to reason.”<sup>162</sup> Not only does Konrad decidedly reject the facile victim-aggressor binaries at the heart of Kundera’s Central European “tragedy,” but more importantly emphasizes that the responsibility for Europe’s recent history of violence needs to be shared by all:

And finally it was us, Central Europeans, who started both world wars. Military irrationalism wrapped in patriotic rhetoric brought on our tragedy. Its fury destroyed the bulk of Central European Jewry.<sup>163</sup>

Konrad acknowledges that the destructive potential of Central Europe that is not linked to a specific nation but is imminent to the heterogeneity of the region and cannot be simply blamed on an outside threat like the Germans or Soviet Russians. He agrees with Kundera’s verdict that the Jews can be considered paradigmatic Central Europeans through their status as a mobile, multi-lingual and non-nationalist minority, but is also quick to point out that it is Central Europe’s vulnerability to nationalist ideology and its past pursuits for homogeneity which created a perfect breeding ground for anti-Semitism and other racist ideologies. To overcome these separatist tendencies, Konrad does not speak so much of “small nations” like Kundera but rather of “amicable communities” and “civil ties” that will help to transform Central Europe from a ‘dream’ into reality and prevent it from the failures of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and even more so the destruction wreaked by the Second World War.

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 117.



What then, is the alternative, and how can this legacy of dissent be overcome? One aspect that has puzzled Western critics of the new debate on Central Europe is the fact that at the same time that the fictionality and literariness of Central Europe is affirmed, it is also presented as the space for a new movement of civil engagement. Konrad summed this up as a call for “antipolitics,” which, contrary to an apolitical stance, does not equal indifference or apathy, but rather offers a strategy of resistance based on general tenets of humanism. It prioritizes the rights of the individual human being, as well as the dignity of all human beings through the rejection of political collectives, their dehumanizing power structures and bureaucracies:

Antipolitik ist der geistige Widerstand eines Autors gegen die überzogene Macht der politischen Klasse, der politischen Strukturen. Antipolitik ist die Selbstverteidigung des bürgerlichen Individuums gegen seinen aufgerüsteten Staat, der unter Umständen im Militärbündnis mit anderen Staaten das bürgerliche Individuum letzten Endes der persönlichen Entscheidung eines fernen Kommandeurs unterstellt. [...] Antipolitik kann nicht langweilig sein. Ein Schriftsteller unterhält seine Leser damit, dass er die Grundstrukturen der heutigen Welt, jenen Rahmen, der uns umgibt, als etwas Irres darstellt.<sup>164</sup>

Konrad’s belief in literature as a medium for antipolitics comes very close to Zweig’s treatment of art as a substitute for both politics and religion, except for its subversive dimension. By presenting literature as a remedy against individual estrangement, Konrad refers to the irony with which Marxist philosophy had come to support exactly those circumstances of modernity which it had professed to eradicate. As self-defense via literature, antipolitics does not have a clear goal or program, since that would make it ideological, which is also why it promotes engagement as free self-expression, not as activism. In this scenario, literature becomes both the preserver of culture and a

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<sup>164</sup> György Konrád, *Stimmungsbericht* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 10-11. My translation from the German edition.

subversive agent against oppressive structures, but to avoid its instrumentalization, it should not be taken too seriously either: “Es macht nichts wenn *Antipolitik* nur Reflexion, ein Essay, Literatur, ein Buch unter vielen ist, mehr nicht.”<sup>165</sup> If these seem like paradoxical intentions, they certainly capture the persistent dilemma of Central European authors, both east and west who are writing with an awareness of past or present totalitarian regimes after 1945. In fact, the question to which extent literature should be ‘engaged,’ ignited by Sartre and Adorno soon after the Second World War, gained particular relevance in postwar German and Austrian literature, where engagement meant a coming to terms with the recent past. In the Soviet satellite states, engaged literature faced different challenges, due to the risk of disappearing inside the stifling corset of socialist-realism, the addling results of which Adorno had quite sardonically called “boy meets tractor literature.”<sup>166</sup>

The Eastern European juxtaposition of civil society to a politicized society as outlined by Konrad contributed to a renewed enthusiasm for the concept of civil society in the West from the 1980s onward, and seemed to find its ultimate justification with the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato argued in their endorsement for a new civil society after the failure of communism, civil society could lead to true empowerment for the citizen if one considered the pitfalls already inherent in western democracy and admitted that the strict separation between private and public sphere (something not just latently assumed by Konrad, but also Hannah Arendt) was an

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<sup>165</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>166</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 237.

illusion.<sup>167</sup> For the Eastern European dissidents, the call for civil society was tied, more than anything, to the reclaiming of civil rights of cultural production that had been encumbered by censorship.<sup>168</sup> More than the call for the autonomy of literature or the right to one's own national history, it was the promise of civil society that put Central Europe on the map again for Western intellectuals. After the Prague Spring of 1968, or at the latest with the appearance of Solidarnosz and the declaration of martial law in Poland in 1981, particularly the French leftists finally realized that the Socialist experiment in Europe had terribly failed. While their West German colleagues had witnessed the disintegration of socialist ideals through totalitarian patterns upfront in the neighboring GDR, the French left had remained a staunch supporter of communism until very late.<sup>169</sup>

Tony Judt considers the new “language of rights” that emerged amongst Western supporters as symptomatic for the self-interest that saw Central Europe as an opportunity to salvage forsaken political hopes: “[...] what we are seeing here is once again a projection of a Western radical vision onto an imaginary Central European landscape. Where once it was the fantasy of socialism, now it is the dream of a ‘united, independent Europe.’”<sup>170</sup>

For Konrad specifically, the antipolitical civil society he defended both as a utopian dream and realistic project rested on a relentless insistence on Europe's tenets of

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<sup>167</sup> See Jean L. Cohen and Andrew Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory* (Baskerville, Massachusetts, MIT Press, 1992).

<sup>168</sup> See Vaclav Havel, “Speech on the Occasion of ‘Vaclav Havel’s Civil Society Symposium’, presented April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1999 in St.Paul., Minneapolis, accessed on June 12, 2015, at [http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=projevy&val=106\\_aj\\_projevy.html&typ=HTML](http://www.vaclavhavel.cz/showtrans.php?cat=projevy&val=106_aj_projevy.html&typ=HTML).

<sup>169</sup> Tony Judt, “The Rediscovery of Central Europe,” *Daedalus*; Winter 1990; 119, 1: 31-35.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

humanism, irrespective of the fact that humanist philosophies had been misappropriated in the past. He understood humanism not as an isolated anthropocentrism, but saw it as deeply interrelational, as the capacity to grasp one's own humanity through the humanity of others.<sup>171</sup> Having experienced the effects of separatist ideologies just the interwar Austrian writers, he thus defined humanism in its broadest sense as a resistance against fundamentalism, spiting all those who would accuse the humanist tradition of being sentimental, too vague, and therefore useless. Konrad's radical humanism begins where it ends for Stefan Zweig – the reign of terror embodied in Nazism and Auschwitz:

Humanismus, was ist das? [...] Die Tötung von Menschen in jedem Fall Mord zu nennen. Kein Buch, keine heilige Schrift, Idee, Bewegung, Institution für wertvoller zu halten als ein Menschenleben. Die großen Schlachten als große Katastrophen anzusehen. [...]<sup>172</sup>

1933 wurde ich geboren, im Jahr der Bücherverbrennungen. Ich bekam schon amtliche Briefe, worin man mir mitteilte, meine beschlagnahmten Tagebücher und Romane seien der Vernichtung zugeführt worden. Der Humanismus hat mir noch nie Schwierigkeiten gemacht. Der Fundamentalismus dagegen hat mich fortwährend sekkiert, beschimpft und um ein Haar ermordet.<sup>173</sup>

What is crucial here is that for Konrad Hitler's rise to power and the period of Soviet rule blend almost seamlessly into each other. His assertion that a Central European poetics had to take into account the double assault of terror in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Nazism and Stalinism) if its defense of humanist values was to be taken seriously, is what distinguishes Konrad's perspective from Kundera's and Miłosz's. While the latter two had lamented the disappearance of Central European Jews, they had been reluctant to bring fascism into the picture, probably because they did not want to give credit to the

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<sup>171</sup> See Emmanuel Levinas, *Humanism of the Other* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2003).

<sup>172</sup> Konrad, *Stimmungsbericht*, 56.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

Soviet ideology of anti-fascism. One late contributor to the 1980s debate agreed with Konrad on this issue and had also drawn parallels between those two totalitarian regimes in his fiction: the Yugoslav-Jewish author Danilo Kiš.<sup>174</sup> Kiš, who, like Konrad had grown tired of the leftist admiration for the Soviet state, asserted that both movements wreaked equal destruction on the European Jewry, whose fate should not be considered as exclusive to a certain religious or ethnic group, but rather as symptomatic for all marginalized, not easily classifiable subjects of Central Europe.<sup>175</sup>

It is important to note at this point that Naumann was one of the few German *Mitteleuropa* theorists who spoke out against anti-Semitism, and who recognized the significance of Jewish citizens for the region as a whole. Not only was there a strong Jewish presence all over Central European territory, but also because their vital contribution to the intellectual and economic wealth of the region could hardly be ignored: “Es würde deshalb sehr falsch sein, beim Gedanken an Mitteleuropa die Juden außer acht zu lassen. Sie sind vorhanden und bedeuten viel für Zeitungen, wirtschaftliches Leben und Politik.” Political anti-Semitism, he reasoned, would not prevail in a Central European union because Jews had demonstrated their patriotic loyalties by fighting side by side with Germans in the battles of the First World War: “Nach dem Kriege muss Schluss gemacht werden mit allen gegenseitigen Verhetzungen, denn im Hintergrund liegt der gemeinsame Schützengraben. Der ist politisch ebenso viel

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<sup>174</sup> Danilo Kiš, “Variations on Central European Themes,” *Homo Poeticus. Essays and Interviews*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1995), 95-114.

<sup>175</sup> Danilo Kiš, “Judaism,” in Danilo Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, 35-38.

wert als die Taufe.”<sup>176</sup> Here Naumann aligns himself with Ernest Renan’s claim that shared pain allowed for a more effective construction of national memory than shared joys, and that the distortion of historical facts was often necessary for the creation for the cohesion.<sup>177</sup> To Naumann, the Jewish question was clearly not a question of race but rather of allegiance. This is why the traditional German mindset, which considered the Christian heritage (not the Judeo-Christian-Occidental heritage as Kundera had maintained) as indelibly tied to European national identity had to be overcome. He subsumed the long history of anti-Semitism in the region simply under the conflicted “Nationalitätenfrage,” which had to be carefully analyzed as such, and then dismissed on grounds of irrationality. Just like Konrad and Kundera, he was convinced that the shared experience of struggle and suffering, as well as its memory would be the binding agent of the Central Europe.

But not all ambiguity of allegiance was that easily resolvable. The plans for Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia as consciously chosen, multinational Slavic states presented a special challenge to the idea of *Mitteleuropa* already at the time of Naumann’s writing, because they made the German leadership in the region obsolete. As political entities they therefore appeared equally threatening and unpredictable as the Jews were in their role as instable national subjects, particularly after the arrival of Zionism. This is why Masaryk emphasized the importance of an independent kingdom of Yugoslavia for a truly free *Mitteleuropa*, knowing that it would substantially challenge

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<sup>176</sup> Naumann, *Mitteleuropa*, 71.

<sup>177</sup> Aleida Assman, *Der lange Schatten der Vergangenheit. Erinnerungskultur und Geschichtspolitik* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 2006), 42.

the widespread notion that order and prosperity in heterogeneous demographic regions could only be achieved by relying on the cultural, if not political tutelage of Germany.<sup>178</sup> As an overhauled, ideologically liberated mini-Habsburg under moderate Socialist premises, post 1945 Yugoslavia was admired both by western and eastern intellectuals, until the eruption of interethnic violence in the 1990s lead many of them to reconsider this assessment.<sup>179</sup>

The authors I discuss in the following chapters all reflect the challenges and dichotomies of the *Mitteleuropa* debate – the legacy of totalitarian rule, the suppression of memory and the editing of history, the friction between a perceived center and its margins. Having been raised close to the former Habsburg periphery, in Carinthia, the Austrian writers Ingeborg Bachmann and Peter Handke continue the vision of *Mitteleuropa* through a solidarization with the Slovene minority, which is fueled by the nostalgia for a more diverse Austria on one hand, and a rejection of the reactionary appropriation of the Habsburg legacy on the other. Both disapproved of the ideological divide during the Cold War, which they sought to overcome by travels to the ostracized east – Bachmann visited Czechoslovakia and Poland in the 1964 and 1973, and Handke traveled repeatedly to the territory of the former Yugoslavia, both before and after the disintegration of the Socialist republic. Aleksandar Tišma and Danilo Kiš present

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<sup>178</sup> Masaryk, *Das neue Europa*, 114.

<sup>179</sup> Kundera signed a petition in *Le Monde* on Oct 21, 1991, calling for a repatriation of Croatia and Slovenia into the fold of Central Europe from which they had been torn by a Serbo-centric Yugoslavia that did not acknowledge their western heritage. Konrád, who was shocked at the return of racist and fascist tendencies in the Yugoslav wars, suggested a policy of neutrality and non-intervention, claiming that the warring parties would eventually exhaust themselves in their tribal excesses of violence. See György Konrád, “An Europas Horizont kichert der Wahnsinn.” In: *Europa im Krieg. Die Debatte über den Krieg im ehemaligen Jugoslawien* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1992), 22.

*Mittleuropa* from the perspective of Yugoslav Jewry as a fractured, haunted space in which memories of recent fascist atrocities compete with Habsburg melancholy and the Socialist fixation on futurity and progress. Their *Mittleuropa*, however, is a different kind of entrapment than the one of Soviet Hungary or Czechoslovakia, even if the literary production of those countries is placed within a common Central European culture and history. This is because Yugoslavia as they conceived it had both fulfilled and betrayed the Habsburg promise within the fifty years of its existence. At first the heterogeneity of the Yugoslav space made it essentially Central European, and through its in-between political status it became a much more successful mediator between the west and the east than Habsburg Vienna had managed to be. As long as the Yugoslav myth was intact, *Mittleuropa* was not needed in Yugoslavia, but once it began to crumble (which started as early as the 1960s) the reference to *Mittleuropa* was used to uncover all that had been covered up during the Socialist utopia. My last literary case study looks at the consequences of the political shift that ended both the division of Central Europe and the existence of Yugoslavia after 1989. My reading of the Austrian author Christoph Ransmayr and the Croatian writer Dubravka Ugrešić demonstrates both the limits of national identity and the pitfalls of transnational associations, which face a difficult task in the aftermath of displacement, oppression and extinction.



## **Chapter 2: Ingeborg Bachmann and Peter Handke – The Austrian Periphery and *Mittleuropa***

### **Historical Overview**

With the moral burden of fascism that the postwar generation of Austrian writers had to face after 1945, “Mittleuropa,” both as a debate and imaginary, acquires an additional dimension beyond the legacy of the multiethnic Habsburg past. What Jewish-Austrian writers like Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth had presented both nostalgically and critically as a hybrid cultural complex that was being destroyed by totalitarian tendencies became tragically relevant after its prophesized demise. For writers like Bachmann and Handke, who were adolescents or children during the Second World War, and therefore experienced a different process of coming to terms with the past than their parents, the process of self-positioning was more complex. Their struggle with memory, both of the recent fascist era (pertaining to their own youth), as well as of larger-than-life Habsburg era, might not be unique to postwar writers in Austria, but it carries a specific weight that is determined not just by political events but by conflicted personal family histories. Their reciprocal literary engagement with both pasts results in a permanent balancing act within their work: their conscious affirmation of Austrian identity and history is at the same time accompanied by numerous attempts to deconstruct, break through, renegotiate the stifling parameters of that framework. Their upbringing in border region of Carinthia, where cultural and linguistic exchange with Slavic minorities and the Southeastern neighbors was part of everyday life, has instilled them with an awareness for the multiethnic, diverse landscape of the former Habsburg complex. On the other hand, Carinthia was one of the regions that most fervently welcomed Hitler upon the annexation of Austria in 1938, and neither familial relationships nor the educational

system they were involved with remained untainted by the influence of NS fascism. For Bachmann, her father's early membership in the NSDAP, as well as her close bond to the politically tainted "poet laureate" of Carinthia, Josef Friedrich Perkonig, remained a taboo theme in her writing, which was otherwise passionately calling for a radical confrontation with the recent past. In a similar strategy, Handke placed his mother's Slovenian heritage at the center of his work since the late 1970s, eclipsing his German father and stepfather (both of whom had been Wehrmacht soldiers) from his "narratives on the margin,"<sup>180</sup> which repeatedly attacked the provincial and still latently fascist mindset of his native environment. Even against the admonishment of a too personalized reading, the tensions and contradictions created by these biographical factors should be taken into account, for they do surface on the poetical level as well.

What György Konrad has characterized as defining for the Central European literature<sup>181</sup> can certainly be applied to the work of Bachmann and Handke: it is critical but professes to be antipolitical, it is historically aware and yet affirmative of utopian vision, and even though it believes in the redemptive power of art, it is fuelled by the profound dismay with the current state of the world. Another quality that is cited by Konrad, the pervasive feeling of homelessness and displacement shows up as a central theme for those two authors: "Nirgendwo sind wir wirklich zu Hause. [...] Unser

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<sup>180</sup> Similar to Bachmann, Handke's poetics emphasizes experiences and phenomena on the margin ("Ränder"), spaces of in-between ("Zwischenräume") and borderlines ("Grenzverläufe"). A detailed analysis of these tropes will follow in the second part of this chapter. See Klaus Amman et al., *Peter Handke. Poesie der Ränder* (Vienna: Böhlau, 2006), as well as Peter Handke and Michael Gamper, *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen. Ein Gespräch* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1990).

<sup>181</sup> György Konrad, "Mitteleuropäische Meditationen," *Dialog. Beiträge zur Friedensforschung*. 25. An outline for these "Central European qualities" has been given in the preface, which is why I am not including the quotes here.

Zuhausesein ist immer ein bisschen bedrückend, unser Fernsein von zu Hause immer ein bisschen Heimatlosigkeit [...].<sup>182</sup> The loss of a stable home, both geographically and morally, is at the heart of critical postwar Austrian writing, culminating in the genre of Anti-Heimatliteratur in the 1970s and 1980s, of which Elfriede Jelinek, Thomas Bernhard, Gerhard Fritsch are only the most prominent representatives.

In order to discuss Bachmann's and Handke's work within the literary field of references that constitutes Mitteleuropa, the unique literary situation in Austria after the war has to be taken into account. The Moscow declaration of 1942, which had stated Austria as the first victim of Nazi Germany, had provided the foundation for the second Austrian Republic established in 1955, and it also set the tone with which the recent past, particularly the country's involvement in Nationalist-Socialist aggression and genocide would be discussed in the decades to follow.

Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler writes about the "terrifying [intellectual] vacuum" in post-1945 Austria, caused by the fact that many of those writers who had defined Austrian (and specifically Viennese) literature in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century had been exiled or murdered, and only few returned.<sup>183</sup> Formerly established writers like Robert Musil, Herman Broch, Joseph Roth, Ödön von Horvath and Karl Kraus, who had been prohibited during the NS period, had faded from public consciousness, and their works were now difficult to obtain.<sup>184</sup> On the other hand, authors who had thrived under Hitler,

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid..

<sup>183</sup> Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler talks about "erschreckendes Vakuum," and "intellektueller Aderlaß," in *Bruchlinien*, 19.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 20.

promoting homogenous concepts of Austrian *Heimat* and *Volk*, were quickly rehabilitated and soon regained their influence in the postwar literary market.<sup>185</sup> Rather than entailing a critical examination of the events between 1938 and 1945, the public re-education in the aftermath of disaster was based on an orientation towards the future and a stubborn belief in progress. To serve the self-image of the newly independent Austrian nation state, the collective past was evoked as one continuous bloc of Habsburg glory up until 1918 (with convenient blind spots for both the Nazi period and the tumultuous first Republic). This allowed for the recuperation of a resilient “age-old” Austrian identity that had survived the hijacking by Nazi impostors and could now be celebrated again.<sup>186</sup> Voices of dissent were not so much suppressed as they were ignored, as the postwar literary landscape quickly split into two fractions: one that was comprised of more or less apologetic traditionalists, belonging mostly to an older generation of writers, and another which was constituted by a young, inquisitive, increasingly frustrated literary generation who refused to let bygones be bygones. On one side of this spectrum was Ilse Aichinger’s provocative manifesto, “Aufruf zum Mißtrauen” (1946), first published in the liberal, left-leaning magazine *Der Plan*, which fiercely attacked the amnesiac postwar optimism and stood in stark contrast to the restorative opinion of a writer like Alexander Lernet-Holenia, who encouraged Austrian writers to look to their glorious (pre-Fascist) tradition

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<sup>185</sup> Prominent examples for Nazi affiliated Heimatliteratur that continued its popularity after 1945 would be Mirko Jelusich, Bruno Brehm, Josef Friedrich Perkonig or the literary critic Josef Nadler. See Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien*, 20, and Klaus Zeyringer, *Österreichische Literatur 1945-1998: Überblicke, Einschnitte, Wegmarken* (Innsbruck: Haymon, 1999), 21 on how Nadler’s racial notions of literary production entered the first *Literaturgeschichte Österreichs* (1948) after the war and remained influential until the 1960s. See also Hans H. Schulte and Gerald Chapple, ed., “Austrian Literature: A Concept,” in *Shadows of the Past: Austrian Literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 1-34.

<sup>186</sup> Zeyringer, 49 – 50; 53

of the past for postwar orientation. More precisely, things were to be picked up where they were interrupted “by a madman” in 1938 – a stance that corresponded well with the political apathy and escapism identified with the Habsburg myth.<sup>187</sup> Aichinger was voicing the outrage that many surviving Austrian Jews felt in the postwar atmosphere of silence and denial: not only were the wrongs they had suffered still far from publicly acknowledged, let alone met with any kind of moral or financial restitution, but they were downplayed even by members of their own community. The fierceness of her appeal, poetically expanded in her novel *Die größere Hoffnung* (1948), was countered by a more conciliatory stance of older Jewish returnees like Hans Weigel, Friedrich Torberg and Herman Hakel, all of whom had influential roles in Vienna’s literary landscape of the 1950s. Both Torberg, and Weigel contributed to the apolitical atmosphere in Vienna’s first postwar decade: as declared anticommunists, they furthered aesthetically concerned and ‘moderate’ writing and avoided works that interrogated the past in a too provocative manner, together they enforced a boycott of Brecht’s plays in Vienna which lasted from 1952 until 1963.<sup>188</sup> Of course the Jewish question in postwar Austria was equally important to non-Jewish writers who were looking for new modes of expression in the aftermath of catastrophe; and the stance that was taken towards the Holocaust as a collective legacy (either leftist and affirmative, or conservative and defensive) determined which of the two camps one belonged to. Ingeborg Bachmann characterized

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<sup>187</sup> “[...] nur dort fortzusetzen wo uns die Träume eines Irren unterbrochen haben, in der Tat brauchen wir nicht voraus-, sondern nur zurückzublicken (...) wir sind im besten und wertvollsten Verstande unsere Vergangenheit,” quoted in Zeyringer, 54. Both Claudio Magris (*The Habsburg Myth in Austrian Literature*, 1963) and Ulrich Greiner (*Der Tod des Nachsommers*, 1979) identify nostalgic Austrian writing with lack of political awareness and engagement.

<sup>188</sup> See Katrin Maria Kohl and Ritchie Robertson, *A History of Austrian Literature: 1918 – 2000* (Rochester: Camden House, 2006), 121.

the warring factions as well as the stalemate between them in one of her lectures on poetics at the University of Frankfurt in 1962:

Von der einen Seite hören Sie das Wehklagen über den Verlust der Mitte, und die Etiketten für diese mittelosen Literaturprodukte lauten: alogisch, zu kalkuliert, irrational, zu rational, destruktiv, antihumanistisch [...] Dem gegenüber [...] heißt es , und ja, begrüßen wir es, das Alogische, Absurde, Groteske, anti-, dis- und de-Destruktion, Diskontinuität, es gibt das Antistück, den Anti-Roman, vom Anti-Gedicht war noch nicht die Rede, vielleicht kommt es noch.<sup>189</sup>

Bachmann's amused tone in the depiction above, which also extends to the necessity for taking sides ("Man hat also die Wahl, bräuchte sich nur mit Begeisterung über das eine, mit Abscheu über das andere zu äußern und sich auf die einem zusagende Seite schlagen,"<sup>190</sup>) indicates her profound skepticism for such categorical separations. For those who were advocating continuity and humanist values in Austrian literature were on some level not acknowledging the rupture that had occurred with Auschwitz and which had deepened the crisis of language ("Sprachverzweiflung" and "Stürze ins Schweigen" 301) brought about by modernity (here Bachmann quotes extensively from Hugo von Hofmannsthal's *Lord Chandos* letter). Hofmannsthal's distressed realization that words have lost their innocence and meaning is still valid for her generation, as Bachmann concludes: "Das Vertrauensverhältnis zwischen Ich und Sprache und Ding ist schwer erschüttert."<sup>191</sup> In their attempt to subvert genres and conventions, the irrational and deconstructivist writers mentioned above were radically affirming the need for a new language: "Mit einer neuen Sprache wird der Wirklichkeit immer dort begegnet, wo ein

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<sup>189</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, "Aus den Frankfurter Poetikvorlesungen," in *Werke III* (Munich: Piper, 1964), 299.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

moralischer, erkenntnishafter Ruck geschieht [...]”<sup>192</sup> The jolt-like, unanticipated quality of formal innovations (“Ruck”), as well as the acknowledgment of fractures (“Brüche,” “Risse”) and damages is also what characterizes Bachmann’s and Handke’s writing, stemming from a loss of metaphysical orientation (“Verlust der Mitte”), while at the same time trying to establish this orientation through literature, or art. Later in his life, Handke has described this attempt to ‘make whole’ and restructure the fragments of experience in the following manner:

[...] diese Rucke, die man beim Übergang von einem Satz zu einem anderen hat, im Erarbeiten, im Bedenken, im Finden auch, nicht im Erfinden...diese Detailstrukturen: es sind ja nicht nur Details wie bei den Impressionisten, sondern es sind detaillierte *Strukturen*, verknüpft dann zu einem scheinhaften Ganzen.<sup>193</sup>

Both Handke and Bachmann recur to a vision of Austria in which the cracks, rifts, and irregularities cannot be ignored, but are in fact part and parcel of postwar life, and also show up in the formal aspects of their writing. The ruptures and jolts that we find in their writing are closely linked to the discrepancy those writers recognized between the space they were coming from (hybrid, multi-ethnic, on one hand, and yet stifling, reactionary, morally compromised on the other) and the literary and ethical space they were trying to create as postwar writers. Neither Bachmann nor Handke are able to free themselves of the pitfalls of inherited ideology completely, and to some extent, they are aware of that. This explains the prevalent dialectics of hopeful vision (utopia) and bitter disappointment in their work, even as it becomes more differentiated over the decades.

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>193</sup> Handke/Gamper, *Aber ich lebe ja nur von den Zwischenräumen*, 45.

Even though Bachmann's criticizes the politicization of literature, she places great emphasis on writing being rooted in experience ("...eine neue Erfahrung wird *gemacht* und nicht aus der Luft geholt," 304) and historical awareness ("Daß Dichten außerhalb der geschichtliche Situation stattfindet, wird heute wohl niemand mehr glauben..."309). As opposed to the urban gestation of 20s and 30s Viennese modernism, the new wave of Austrian writers came predominantly from rural regions. The seeds of the aforementioned Anti-Heimatliteratur were sown there, and it produced a group of Avantgarde Austrian writers in the 1960s, who saw themselves in opposition to engaged German writers like Günter Grass, Peter Schneider and Heinrich Böll, as well as the general tenor of the Gruppe 47. Among them were Alfred Kolleritsch and Peter Handke.<sup>194</sup>

Ingeborg Bachmann and Peter Handke may belong to different generations of postwar writers, but they are connected by a multitude of commonalities: both emphasize Austria's legacy of heterogeneity, which they tie both to their upbringing in borderland Carinthia, but also with a literary sensibility influenced by the Habsburg past. Their struggles with the role of the Austrian writer in postwar times relate to this, and explain their dissatisfaction with how ethical and aesthetic issues in postwar literature were addressed in the distinctly German *Gruppe 47*, in which they were both involved at different times. Both authors discuss the precarious nature of language after the Shoah and the Second World War, and are considered representative literary voices of their respective generation. Towards the end of this chapter, I would like to demonstrate why Handke's path as a writer starts off on a similar ethical footing as Bachmann's, but then

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<sup>194</sup> Helga Schreckensberger, "Suffering from Austria. Social Criticism in Prose Fiction of the Seventies and Eighties," in *Shadows of the Past: Austrian Literature of the 20<sup>th</sup> century*, ed. Hans H. Schulte and Gerald Chapple (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 108.



succumbs to a highly problematic historical mysticism. Their shared aversion for political cant and for fascist violent provinciality, which is countered by a longing for diversity in the form of an “other,” their fascination with the Slovenian minority in Carinthia and later other figures on the margin – for Bachmann, the woman in post-fascist Austria, and for Handke the poet as prophet in a time of disenchantment and deceit.

Several studies have pointed out Bachmann’s commitment to ethical writing, which is rooted in a profound political consciousness,<sup>195</sup> even though her kind of engagement was a cautious one, and certainly fit in more with Adorno’s than Satre’s definition of the term.<sup>196</sup> Handke, on the other hand, has undergone a baffling development in his relationship with the political. His early, experimental work earned him the reputation of being an apolitical or antipolitical writer, while his later turn to classicist ideals and metaphysics was read a lapse into “premodern,” even reactionary tendencies. The latter assessment has been upheld since the metaphysical turn in his writing in the early 1980s, and was reinforced by the literary scandal of his travelogues written in support of Serbia during and after the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.<sup>197</sup> I would like to examine at what point Handke’s path diverged from a postwar language criticism

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<sup>195</sup> Hans Höller (*Ingeborg Bachmann*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999) has presented Bachmann as a resistance writer; Sigrid Weigel has uncovered her networks and contacts with Jewish intellectuals (*Ingeborg Bachmann. Hinterlassenschaften unter Wahrung des Briefgeheimnisses* (Vienna: P. Zsolnay Verlag, 1999)) and Arturo Larcati considers Bachmann’s ethical principles and political awareness ((*Ingeborg Bachmanns Poetik* (Darmstadt: WGB Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2006)).

<sup>196</sup> See Jean Paul Sartre, “Qu'est-ce que la littérature?” *Les temps modernes*, 1947. Theodor W. Adorno, “Engagement,” in *Noten zur Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1994).

<sup>197</sup> See Evelyne Polt-Heinzl, *Peter Handke. In Gegenwelten unterwegs* (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 2011), Jean Bertrand Miguoué, *Peter Handke und das zerfallende Jugoslawien* (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2012).

similar to Bachmann's, and why his search for a literary utopia comes to different conclusions. Ultimately, it is Handke's radically different stance towards historiography (which he does not distinguish from history) that leads him to develop his own poetics of the margin, one that affirms the existence of a Central European space but at the same time rejects it as a discourse, suspecting it to be merely a rehashing of imperialistic ambitions.

### **Ingeborg Bachmann – “Mitteleuropa” of the Margins. Between Memory and “Heimat”**

Europäisch denken? Wer geriete da nicht in Verlegenheit, wenn er, zum Beispiel, nicht einmal weiß, was deutsch oder österreichisch denken heißt [...]. Denken, gewiß, auch historisch denken und utopisch denken, daß die Risse eines Tage wirklich aufspringen, dort wo sie aufspringen *müssen* und die Grenzverläufe sich zeigen müssen [...].<sup>198</sup>

The words above are taken from a contribution Ingeborg Bachmann wrote in 1964 for the multi-lingual, European literary magazine *Gulliver*. Even though the project never made it past a first issue in Italian, Bachmann's essay boldly outlines the conditions and precautions under which a new European consciousness in literature can and should be explored. Thinking along the lines of the nation state is made more difficult not only because the post war European landscape has been transformed by radical shifts, cuts and losses, but also as a result of the devastating injustices committed in the name of nationalist ideologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly enough, the new approach Bachmann proposes is both “historical” (remembering the past) as well as “utopian”

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<sup>198</sup> Bachmann, *Werke 4*, (Munich: Piper 1978), 70.

(envisioning a more hopeful future)<sup>199</sup> and is put in the service of uncovering the “cracks” and “borders,” i.e. the divisions, traumas, differences that need to be acknowledged in post-1945 Europe.

Bachmann’s notion of transnational literary dialogue deliberately sets itself apart from the Austrian “Mitteleuropa” discourse of the interwar years, most prominently expressed in Stefan Zweig’s memoir *Die Welt von gestern*. In the aftermath of Auschwitz, a humanistic approach, which treats literature as a substitute for politics (not only expressed by Zweig, but also Thomas Mann<sup>200</sup>) and considers it a generic remedy for barbarism seem hypocritical. The times in which “eine kultivierte Elite, geschmackvolle Connaisseurs, gebildete Bürger und Aristokraten [...] sich ihr Europa in den Wolken machen konnten, mit verliebter Bewunderung in die Literaturen, Malereien und Musiken der anderen, ein feines Gespinst spinnend“ are over, Bachmann claims. Its failures are too grave:

[...] für diese Elite, ob sie nun ahnungslos oder ahnungsvoll war, [wurden] plötzlich zweimal die Fahmentücher und das Uniformtuch eingefärbt [...] von Leuten, die weniger Geschmack hatten und die in derselben Zeit wieder das Pulver erfanden und ihre Europäer kurzerhand wieder in ihre Provinzen einsperrten oder sie exilierten oder ermordeten und deren sicheren Geschmack und deren kosmopolitischen Schwärmereien den Garaus machten. Europäisch sich fühlen, noch einmal auf diese Weise – wem fehlten nicht die Mittel dazu, und wer wäre nicht gewarnt?<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>199</sup> Bachmann, *Werke 4*, 196, “Fragen und Scheinfragen,” (1. Poetikvorlesung), about the role of the poet: “Gelingen kann ihm, im glücklichsten Fall, zweierlei: zu repräsentieren, seine Zeit zu repräsentieren, und etwas zu präsentieren, für das die Zeit noch nicht gekommen ist.”

<sup>200</sup> See Thomas Mann’s radio essays during WWII (Thomas Mann, *Deutsche Hörer! Radiosendungen nach Deutschland aus den Jahren 1940-1945* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2004), but also his essays on politics and WW I, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1991).

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

Bachmann rightly points to the fact that the evocation of a European legacy of arts has become compromised by both apolitical intellectuals, who were left paralyzed in the face of right wing extremism, and radically politicized camps (think of Hitler's expansionist dream of a Germanized Europe). A few years before this article appeared, Bachmann had published her first collection of prose, *Das dreißigste Jahr* (1961) in which she offered a much more merciless portrait of the tensions of postwar Austria than in her poetry.<sup>202</sup> At that time, Bachmann was living in Berlin on a Ford Foundation fellowship, in an environment, which to her, "reeked of disease and death"<sup>203</sup> and served as a constant reminder of the destructive potential behind European values. And yet, Bachmann had experienced the writings of the interwar European 'utopianists' as comforting, even subversive in her youth. In the summer of 1945, she bonded with Jack Hamesh, a British soldier of Austrian Jewish decent, who could not believe that a young girl in Carinthia had managed to read "Thomas [Mann] und Stefan Zweig und Schnitzler und Hofmannsthal," at that time, all of them illegal authors during the Nazi occupation.<sup>204</sup>

Her criticism of the intellectual elites of the 1920s and 30s comes after a process of disillusionment, and after factoring in the geopolitical dynamics of global capitalism and the Cold War, and the new divisions they have brought with them:

Europa ist in ein neues Licht gerückt: Da ist es festzustellen als eine Mischung aus Brachland und Ackerland und als industrielle Potenz, die es möglichst ökonomisch und rücksichtslos auszuwerten gilt. Weiter: als ein günstig-

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<sup>202</sup> While such tendencies do come up in her poems as well, they were relentlessly overlooked by early critics.

<sup>203</sup> Elke Schlinsog, *Berliner Zufälle: Ingeborg Bachmanns „Todesarten“-Projekt* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005), 48–52.

<sup>204</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Kriegstagebuch. Mit Briefen von Jack Hamesh an Ingeborg Bachmann*, ed. Hans Höller (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), 20.

ungünstiger Truppenübungsplatz und Auf-und Umrüstungsversuchsplatz. Weiter: als Vorpforten Teileuropa gegen Teileuropa, von dem sich der eine dem anderen scharfsinnig plausibel machen muß als geharnischter Vertreter von Frieden und Freiheit.<sup>205</sup>

Already the staccato-like structure of this paragraph points to the fragmentation and the binary splits that characterize the European map and reality. Against statements like these, it becomes more difficult to see Bachman as a contributor to what Claudio Magris has called the “Habsburg myth,” among whose ardent subscribers he identifies Stefan Zweig, Joseph Roth, and Robert Musil. Due to her expressed admiration for these authors, as well as her evocation of former Habsburg provinces like Galicia and Bohemia, or formulas such as “the house of Austria” in her novel *Malina*,<sup>206</sup> she has been linked to the Habsburg myth time and again.<sup>207</sup> However, her incorporation of Habsburg topographies and literary dialogue with the writers of the time (especially Joseph Roth and Robert Musil) goes clearly beyond the facile “k.u.k.” nostalgia rather widespread in postwar Austria.<sup>208</sup> Critics who see Bachmann as confirming the Habsburg myth overlook the fact that the memory of the Empire was appropriated both by conservative and liberal forces, and that Bachmann was well aware of Habsburg clichés. It is much more enlightening to read her work in the context of the “Mitteleuropa” discourse of the

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid., 75-76.

<sup>206</sup> See Ingeborg Bachmann. *Malina*, “Todesarten”-Projekt. Kritische Ausgabe.3.1, ed. Robert Pichl, Monika Albrecht and Dirk Göttsche (Munich: Piper 1978, 1982), 397.

<sup>207</sup> See *Acta Neophilologica* 17. *Ingeborg Bachmann*, Ljubljana (1984).

<sup>208</sup> See Luigi Reitani’s analysis of Bachmann’s topographies, who argues “dass wir hier nicht mit einer epigonalen Fortsetzung von Motiven zu tun haben, die nach dem Fall der Monarchie ihre Blütezeit hatten, sondern mit der bewussten Wiederaufnahme einer Tradition, die den literarischen Mythos in seiner unzertrennbaren Zweideutigkeit von Kritik und utopischer Faszination schon *deutet*.” Luigi Reitani, “Heimkehr nach Galicien. Heimat im Werk Ingeborg Bachmanns,” in *Topographien einer Künstlerpersönlichkeit. Neue Annäherungen an das Werk Ingeborg Bachmanns*, ed. Robert Pichl and Barbara Agnese (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2009), 38.

postwar years, which, I believe, needs to be decisively distinguished from the Austrian evocation of “Mitteleuropa” in the 1920s and 30s due to the radical caesura of the Second World War and the Holocaust.

Zweig and others were using their idealized memory of a European community of the arts as they experienced it during the late Habsburg years, in particular the transnational, multilingual and culturally hybrid environment of their youth, in juxtaposition to the rising nationalist and racist tendencies of the time. They believed that the fascist menace would mean the end of culture as they knew it, a prophetic insight that, as Bachmann insinuates (“ahnungslos oder ahnungsvoll”) proved them right.

When Eastern European writers reclaimed the term “Mitteleuropa” in the 1980s to assail the artificial separation of Europe into east and west, they did so, like their Austrian predecessors, out of a perception of deep cultural crisis. However, the latter cannot simply be considered a continuation of the former. Though the cold war debate on “Mitteleuropa” references important aspects of the Habsburg era, such as the entangled connections between nationalities, ethnicities and languages, gestation takes place in the political geography after the divisive Yalta conference, and with a clear awareness of speaking from the periphery of the civilized western world. In his essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” which sparked the eastern European postwar debate, Milan Kundera juxtaposes the hybridity of the Habsburg population, which he sees exemplified in the Central European Jewish bourgeoisie (who is multi-lingual, mobile and adaptive) to the homogenizing influence of Soviet occupation. Ironically, he considers the Baroque age as the unifying historical period of the region as the counter example for the memory vacuum imposed for the sake of socialist progress. Finally, he references subversive

tendencies in Central European literature (Kafka, Hasek, Musil), to contrast the autonomy of art with the rule of ideology, as represented through Soviet-style socialist-realist fiction.<sup>209</sup> In his “Central European Meditations,” György Konrad, whose utopian poetics comes very close to Bachmann’s, foregrounded the crucial role that collective memory played for the postwar discourse on Central Europe, and how it could promote a “new transnationalism:”

Unsere Besonderheit hängt mit dem kollektiven Erinnerungsvermögen zusammen, das auf eine lange Zeitspanne zurückblicken kann. Am ehesten liegt unsere Stärke in der Selbstreflexion. Selbst? Wo ist die Grenze für diesen Begriff zu ziehen? Ausschwärmen von unseren Heimatländern in einen neuen Transnationalismus, das ist die Herausforderung der Zeit.<sup>210</sup>

The writings of the late Habsburg ‘mythologists’ foregrounded the importance of minorities for the region, most significantly the Jewish intellectuals, showing how a tense, but also fruitful relationship between the empire’s center and its margins is constitutive of the ‘spirit’ of *Mitteleuropa*. Bachmann, I would like to argue, along with other critical writers both in Austria and Yugoslavia, demonstrated sensibilities that would pave the way for the *Mitteleuropa* dissidents of the 1980s, pointing both to the postwar divide of Europe and the repressed injustices that had caused this split in the first place.

The postwar discourse of *Mitteleuropa* is deeply connected to the reference of a lost cultural home on one hand, and the creation of a new poetical, literary utopia on the other. It reflects on the problems of retrospective nostalgia by searching for a political space beyond politics, beyond an ideologically tainted space, attempting to create a civic culture where art takes on the highest function of guidance. Writings within the

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid..

<sup>210</sup> György Konrad, “Mitteleuropäische Meditationen,” in *Mitteleuropa? Dialog-Beiträge zur Friedensforschung*, ed. György Konrad (Vienna: VWGÖ-Verlag, 1989): 27-28.

*Mittleuropa* compound after 1945 are not merely contributing to the contradictory phenomenon of the “Habsburg myth.” Instead, they reflect critically on how the trivial myths of the former Empire are used in postwar Austrian culture, taking them up selectively to debunk the more recent national myths of victimhood and “interrupted” historical continuity.<sup>211</sup> More importantly, they are part of an alternative European imaginary that eschews Cold War divisions and the intellectually impoverished situation of a curtailed Austria.<sup>212</sup> The realization that this cultural heritage could also be utilized not only to cover up memories on the repression of Austro-Fascism and the Nazi period but instead to shed light on the recent past was at the core of it. Of equal importance was the idea of a literary network in the twofold sense of critical writers that would come together and influence each other, as well as inter-referential elements within the literary text, thus creating a Central European “republic of letters.”<sup>213</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann’s contribution to *Mittleuropa* imaginaries can be traced both in the concept of the margin and that of the network.

Allegiances and networks would become defining for Bachmann’s later life as an adult writer: whether they be in the form of authors she read and admired, and whose works have left traces on her own texts, or through her participation in literary circles such as the *Gruppe 47* in Germany, and more loosely organized literary networks in Vienna and Rome, the two most important residences of her life. It was with the help of

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<sup>211</sup> Wendelin Schmidt-Dengler, *Bruchlinien. Vorlesungen zur österreichischen Literatur 1945 bis 1990* (St.Pölten –Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 2010).

<sup>212</sup> See Friedrich Torberg’s report about his return to Vienna as quoted in David Axmann, *Friedrich Torberg. Die Biographie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008).

<sup>213</sup> Pascale Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, trans. M.B. DeBevoise (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).



these networks that she was trying to explore what would become the main undercurrent in her writing: the historical legacy of her native Austria, both of the recent Fascist past, and, more subtly so, that of the Habsburg dynasty, whose writers determined her early love for literature and would continue to influence her own aesthetic and moral stance in postwar Austria. Bachmann's adolescent preference for those writers of the former empire who were known for their highly critical assessment of the monarchy, such as Joseph Roth and Robert Musil, stands in direct relationship to the environment in which she was raised. The cosmopolitanism and intellectual breadth she found in works that were steeped in a more diverse and complex Austrian experience served as the intellectual ferment for her later reflections on home and belonging, the critical and moral implications of literature, and her lifelong fascination with peripheries and borders (be they literary, geographical, moral). Ingeborg Bachmann has foregrounded the importance of her upbringing in the border region of Carinthia – where provincial life met cultural hybridity - repeatedly. Images of small town life, as well as the idyllic landscapes of rural Carinthia feature prominently in Bachmann's adolescent writings (both in her first novella, *Das Honditschkreuz*, as well as in her youth poetry), but their pastoral quality is already tainted. Bachmann has linked the loss of childhood innocence to the arrival of Hitler's troops in her hometown Klagenfurt shortly after the *Anschluss* in 1938. She has decidedly placed this traumatic experience ("ein[en] zu frühen Schmerz"<sup>214</sup>) at the center of her writing and the beginning of her memory. The fact that Bachmann was actually not in town at this very date but still chose to adopt what must have been a transmitted memory as her own makes it even more relevant.

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<sup>214</sup> Bachmann, *Gul*, 111.

And yet there are discrepancies in Bachmann's writings between 1945 and 1946.<sup>215</sup> The most important one relates to the formation of her borderland identity and poetics, which will provide the foundation for much of her later cosmopolitan, anti-ideological writing. In the same year that she expresses her disgust for the NS-teachers who make her and her classmates dig trenches during bombardment ("die Herren Erzieher, die uns umbringen lassen wollen") as well as ecstatically welcomes the end of the war ("dies bleibt der schönste Sommer") and discovers her new infatuation with Jack Hamesh, she also begins composing a series of epistolary poems, whose poetic addressee has been identified as the Carinthian "Heimatsdichter" Josef Friedrich Perkonig.<sup>216</sup> Perkonig, an early supporter of fascist tendencies in Austria, who joined the NSDAP already back in 1936, was her teacher at the NS-Lehrerbildungsanstalt in Klagenfurt and had specifically imbued her with an enthusiasm for Schiller's aesthetic and moral concepts.<sup>217</sup> This has raised the question to which extent Perkonig and his aesthetics might have influenced Bachmann's early texts, which already contain some crucial imageries and concepts for the overall oeuvre. The literary trope of border crossing, which is constitutive for the author's utopia of language, but also her topographical imagination, is one of them.

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<sup>215</sup> Hans Höller points to these contradictions: "...schwerlich begreiflich bleibt die Gespaltenheit des biographischen Ich, jene Trennung und Parzellierung, bei der das Tagebuch nichts von den Briefen weiß und die Briefe nichts vom Tagebuch und diese wieder nichts von anderen Briefen an andere Personen." Hans Höller, *Ingeborg Bachmann* (Reinbek: Rohwolt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999), 35.

<sup>216</sup> Inge von Weidenbaum, "Zumutbare Wahrheiten?" in *Text-Tollhaus für Bachmann-Süchtige? "Lesearten zur kritischen Ausgabe von Ingeborg Bachmanns Todesarten-Projekt"*, ed. Irene Heidelberger-Leonard, (Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1998), 16-21.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

The border was an important theme for Perkonig as well. Being of mixed Slovene and Austrian heritage, he conceived of himself as “a poet of the border” (“Dichter der Grenze”), even while he publicly subscribed to the German superiority over other ethnic groups. The fact that Perkonig staged himself as a mediator between Austrians and Slovenes, and often assigned this role to his protagonists is not that contradictory if we take into account that the term “Grenze” had been appropriated by proto-fascist, nationalist Austrian writers years before the *Anschluss*.<sup>218</sup> The genre of the *Grenzlandroman*, alternately set in border regions such as Bohemia, Tyrol, Carinthia, Sudeten and Volga German territory, maintained that the true essence of the German *Volk* manifested itself particularly in demarcation against the racially inferior neighbors. As a subcategory of the *Heimatroman*, it suggested that its threatened and deracinated German protagonists could only be saved by means of an ambitious expansionist plan, resulting in a de facto eradication of borders.<sup>219</sup> The “Grenze” also served as an integral part in Nationalist-Socialist cultural politics, to which several propagandist “Grenzland” exhibitions attest. Students and professors helped organize an immensely popular exhibition in Munich entitled “Grenzland in Not,” as early as 1933, a 1942 Berlin exhibition, “Die große Heimkehr,” called for the “Sicherung des deutschen Lebensraums im Osten” and finally, a “Grenzland” exhibition was curated 1943 in Klagenfurt, when

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<sup>218</sup> Wendelin Schmidt Dengler, “‘Und gehn auch Grenzen noch durch jedes Wort.’” Zum Motiv der Grenze in der österreichischen Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts,” in *Nachdenken über Grenzen*, ed. Rüdiger Görner and Suzanne Kirkbright (Munich: Iudicium 1999), 223-234.

<sup>219</sup> For the different popular literary genres during Nazi rule (*Grenzlandroman*, *Bauernroman*, *Heimatroman*) see Ingo R. Stoehr, “The National-Socialist Literary Canon: The Uneasy Choice of Reactionary Traditions,” in *German Literature of the Twentieth Century. From Aestheticism to Postmodernism* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2001), 165-192.

Ingeborg Bachmann was sixteen.<sup>220</sup> Also, *Grenzlandromane* were part of the literary atmosphere in the late 1930s, as satirically captured by Leo Perutz in his émigré novel *Mainacht in Wien*, set in 1938 Vienna, where the most popular genres are described as “Grenzlandgeschichten, Romane aus den Befreiungskriegen, und Erzählungen aus der germanischen Frühzeit.”<sup>221</sup>

It is this environment, of which the encounter with Perkonig makes up a significant part, that needs to be taken into account Bachmann’s when examining early manifestations of her discussed border poetics. In a much quoted prose fragment entitled “Biographisches,” Bachmann describes the experience of growing up in an ethnic and linguistic borderland as defining:

Ich habe meine Jugend in Kärnten verbracht, im Süden, an der Grenze, in einem Tal, das zwei Namen hat -- einen deutschen und einen slowenischen. Und das Haus, in dem seit Generationen meine Vorfahren wohnten – trägt noch heute einen fremdklingenden Namen. So ist nahe der Grenze noch einmal die Grenze: die Grenze der Sprache – ich war hüben und drüben zu Hause, mit den Geschichten von guten und bösen Geistern zweier und dreier Länder; denn über den Bergen, eine Wegstunde weit, liegt schon Italien.<sup>222</sup>

Similarly, we read in Perkonig:

Am Fuße der Karawanken, einem geisterhaft bleichen Gebirge, aufgewachsen, in einer Landschaft, in der sich deutsches und slawisches Volkstum berühren, erlebte ich früh das seltsame Wesen der Grenze. Etwas von dem Grenzhafte unter einem

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<sup>220</sup> See Patricia Broser, *Ein Tag wird kommen... Utopiekonzepte im Werk Ingeborg Bachmanns* (Vienna: Praesens Verlag, 2009), 65. On NS exhibitions in Germany see Hans-Ulrich Thamer, “Geschichte und Propaganda. Kulturhistorische Ausstellungen in der NS-Zeit,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, Geschichtsbilder und Geschichtspolitik (Jul. - Sep., 1998), 349-381.

<sup>221</sup> Perutz as quoted in Müller, “*Unsere heimischen Primitiven sind uns ferner als die der Südsee*,” 2003, 118.

<sup>222</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, “Biographisches,” in: *Werke 4*, 301.

schon südlichen Himmel, wohin aber noch der Hauch der Firne reicht, ist auch meiner Dichtung verblieben [...].<sup>223</sup>

Bachmann's and Perkonig's perception's of liminality as something beneficial, but also mysterious and enchanting is perspicuous in its similarity – both emphasize spirits and ghosts; for the folkloristic poet Perkonig it is the essential mystery of the landscape, the “geisterhaft bleiche[s] Gebirge,” which weaves its spell equally over the two major ethnic groups, whereas Bachmann emphasizes “gute und böse Geister“, the ethical component of this hybrid heritage. The marked difference, however, is that Bachmann claims the space on both sides of the border as her true home (“ich war hüben und drüben zu Hause“), whereas Perkonig's musings on the liminal remain confined to exoticizing stereotypes: “Hauch der Firne” and “südliche[r] Himmel“ point to a touch of the foreign rather than an embracing of two different elements. In a poem entitled in “Von einem Land, einem Fluss und den Seen,” published in her first collection in 1953, Bachmann would merge the fairytales of rural Carinthia with elements of destruction, but also offers counter-images to the divisive *Grenzland* ideology of her youth:

Wer weiß, wann sie dem Land die Grenze zogen  
Und um die Kiefern Stacheldrahtverhau?  
Der Wildbach hat die Zündschnur ausgetreten  
Der Fuchs vertrieb den Sprengstoff aus dem Bau.  
[...]  
Woanders sinkt der Schlagbaum auf den Pässen.  
hier wird ein Gruß getauscht, ein Brot geteilt  
Die Handvoll Himmel und ein Tuch voll Erde  
Bringt jeder mit, damit die Grenze heilt.<sup>224</sup>

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<sup>223</sup> Josef Friedrich Perkonig, “Heimat und Heimatkunst,” in *Mich selbst im Spiegel gesehen. Autobiographische Schriften und ausgewählte Gedichte* (Klagenfurt: Verlag Johannes Heyn, 1965), 37.

<sup>224</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, “Von einem Land, einem Fluss und den Seen,” in *Werke 1*, 88.

Even if Bachmann was initially inspired by Perkonig's *Grenzland* poetics, this excerpt is just one example for the ways in which she quickly developed it further into a stance of ideological criticism, the ethics of the border becoming the central reference point for her literary identity, making it an important vantage point for the exploration of the postwar Austrian memory space. Bachmann's response to the regionalism of the *Heimatsdichter* was a moderate transnationalism based on selective aspects of Austria's past. In one of her first interviews in 1955, Bachmann implied that the specific literary field, from which Austrian authors were writing distinguished them from their German counterparts due to the complex, multiethnic past of Habsburg Austria, whose postwar borders do not coincide with reverberations of their legacy:

Die politische und kulturelle Eigenart Österreichs – an das man übrigens nicht in geographischen Kategorien denken sollte, weil seine Grenzen nicht die geographischen sind – scheint mir viel zu wenig beachtet zu werden. [...] Die Österreicher haben an so vielen Kulturen partizipiert und ein anderes Weltgefühl entwickelt als die Deutschen.<sup>225</sup>

In Bachmann's texts, this "Weltgefühl" manifests itself on one hand in border regions like Carinthia, which becomes a topos of conflicting feelings and experiences, referring to a childhood lost and tainted on the one hand, and a vantage point from which different cultures and languages can be explored. The city space of Vienna takes on a similarly twofold function, as different historical layers shine through Bachmann's narratives: The postwar present overlaps continuously with images from the Habsburg era and Nazi rule.

In preparation for assessing Bachmann's relationship to the Habsburg past, I would first like to examine some early instances of *Heimat* and national belonging in her

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<sup>225</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Wir müssten wahre Sätze finden. Gespräche und Interviews*, ed. Christine Koschel und Inge von Weidenbaum (Munich: Piper, 1983), 11-12.

writing that are set against the background of Carinthia in her juvenile novella *Das Honditschkreuz*, as well as excerpts from her recently published ‘war diary’ (*Kriegstagebuch*, includes diary entries and letters written between 1945 and 1946).<sup>226</sup> *Honditschkreuz* is set in 1813 and depicts the Carinthian liberation struggle under Napoleonic occupation. As we learn in the novella’s epigraph, the title is borrowed from a wooden cross that was erected between the villages of Hermagor and Vellach, to commemorate the death of an Austrian and French soldier on that very location. Bachmann was intimately familiar with the geography and history of the Gail valley (“Gailtal”) -- while she went to school in Klagenfurt, the family often spent the summers in Vellach, the native village of her father. Critics have interpreted *Honditschkreuz* as both influenced by Schillerian pathos and as a historically transposed parable for Austrian resistance against Nazi rule.<sup>227</sup> Even if this parallelism does not seem entirely plausible (the struggle against Napoleon was also utilized by pro-fascist thinkers) the political impetus behind the text, but also the careful combination of astute psychological insight and realistic depictions of rural life in Carinthia are astounding. Mimetic representation of the village population is given particular attention, including the description of typical chores and settings (e.g. the “Heuboden,” the village tavern) and villagers who speak local dialect, which has led some critics to interpret the novella as the sentimental

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<sup>226</sup> For a thorough reading of the conflicting tendencies in *Honditschkreuz*, see Mark M. Anderson, “A Delicate Affair. The Young Ingeborg Bachmann,” in *Die Waffen nieder! Ingeborg Bachmanns Schreiben gegen den Krieg*, ed. Karl Ivan Solibakke et al. (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2012), 67-84.

<sup>227</sup> Hans Höller, *Ingeborg Bachmann* (Reinbek: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1999) reads it as an early manifestation of resistance literature (“ein [...] Werk der inneren Emigration,” 13), while Sigrid Weigel (*Ingeborg Bachmann. Hinterlassenschaften unter Wahrung des Briefgeheimnisses*, 1999) mentions the influence of Schiller, but does not consider the novella a serious work of literature. See also Andreas Hapkemeyer, *Ingeborg Bachmann. Entwicklungslinien in Werk und Leben* (Vienna: Verlag der österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1990), 21.

emulation of “Heimatliteratur.” At the same time, the lack of idealizing folkloristic elements, as well as the discriminating use of dialect (only certain characters speak it, and not continuously) suggest that rendering speech authentically is part of the writer’s conscientious writing process.<sup>228</sup> In spite of Bachmann’s close relationship to her mentor Perkonig, who certainly fits into this category, I would like to argue that she in fact introduces crucial dissonances that disrupt the genre that was so intensely promoted during Nazi rule profoundly, even if they do not deconstruct it completely.<sup>229</sup>

*Honditschkreuz* centers around the theology student Franz Brandstetter, who, incited by political friends in Vienna, comes back to his native village Hermagor to join the anti-Napoleonic resistance. Brandstetter is a character tortured by the conflicting influences of his emotions – his decision to revolt is influenced as much by authentic impulse as by peer pressure, and the tension between individual responsibility and collective dynamics are particularly foregrounded. Patterns of exploitation and abuse, be they economic or sexual, are woven into the narrative in a matter-of-fact tone unexpected for a high school student. In particular her treatment of marginalized or to some extent powerless women displays a budding feminist awareness, and her inclusion of Carinthian Slovenes at a time when the eviction of hundreds of Slovenian families through the Nazi

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<sup>228</sup> See Peter Henninger, “»Heuboden und Taschenfeitel«?” Zu Ingeborg Bachmanns Erzählung *Das Honditschkreuz*,” 121 and Peter Beicken, “So eine Geschichte ist ja ein Gewebe.” Zum Schreiben Ingeborg Bachmanns,” 17, both in *Ingeborg Bachmann. Neue Richtungen in der Forschung? Internationales Kolloquium Saranac Lake, June 6 -9, 1991*, ed. Gudrun Brokoph-Mauch and Annette Daigger (St.Ingberg: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 1995).

<sup>229</sup> The genre of “Heimatliteratur” emerged in Austria around 1890 as a response to the perceived decadence of modernist literature. See Karl Müller, “Unsere heimischen Primitiven sind uns ferner als die der Südsee.” *Beobachtungen zur >Heimatliteratur< während der NS-Zeit in Die >österreichische< nationalsozialistische Ästhetik*, ed. Ilija Dürheimer and Pia Janke (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2003), 111.



regime had already been carried out point to her engagement for linguistic and ethnic diversity.

In the novella, political engagement is captured through the psychological lens of group dynamics and emotional volatility. Though historical facts are supplemented where it is useful, Bachmann is more interested in the dialectic relationship of individual versus collective identity and the motivation that lies behind them. She is wary of the power of demagoguery and propaganda, the danger of impulsive actions and the delusion of easy remedies. This is why *Honditschkreuz* is not simply a pamphlet for the Austrian cause, and binary setups of friend versus foe are distinctly avoided: For example, even though the French soldiers stationed in Hermagor are depicted as arrogant and abusive of their power, their commanding officer Maroni is shown in a sympathetic light, since he treats the local population with respect.<sup>230</sup>

It is significant that the plot, along with its protagonist, is introduced by two marginal characters: The poor village woman Waba, a former mistress of Brandstetter, and the Slovenian peddler Mate Banul meet on the way from Vellach to Hermagor. Their marginality in the narrative is constituted in a twofold sense: For one, they are set apart from the regular village community by certain distinctions of class and ethnicity, and they also play a minor role in the novella's events. Their strategic placement at the opening of the novella suggests that their function is a symbolical one, since they both embody principles that cannot be mastered properly by Franz Brandstetter – uninhibited passion and national ambiguity. In particular Mate Banul, part of the Slovenian minority in Carinthia, who is identified as a “Windischer,” is used to deconstruct a popular myth

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 542 - 43.

supported by proto-fascist writers in Carinthia: “Windische” is an ethnic label that has been used with reference to the Slovenian minority in Carinthia for centuries, and since the 19<sup>th</sup> century contributed to the false assumption that a separate ethnicity within the Slovene population existed. It still had colloquial usage in Bachmann’s youth but has been identified as a political construct, which the young Bachmann, as it first appears, simply adopted for lack of better knowledge.<sup>231</sup> Significantly, Perkonig edited an influential political pamphlet by the historian Martin Wutte in 1927 that promoted this *Windischentheorie*.<sup>232</sup> It essentially separated the assimilationist, German-friendly Carinthian Slovenes (“Windische”) from the pro-Slavic ones, claiming that over centuries, anthropologically, historically, linguistically and racially, the “Windische” had developed into a German-Slovene “Mischvolk” and could therefore not be compared to Slovenes proper. This explains why Perkonig, together with other Nazi-affiliated Carinthians, protested the deportation of the Carinthian Slovenes. But while Bachmann refers to the same ethnic category, she places an emphasis on the “in-between” quality of the “Windische,” which makes them ideal mediators of the region:

Die Windischen leben im Gailtal wie überall im Süden Kärntens inmitten von Deutschen, sie haben ihre eigene Sprache, die weder von Slowenen noch von Deutschen so richtig verstanden wird. Mit ihrem Dasein ist es, als wollten sie die Grenze verwischen, die Grenze des Landes, aber auch der Sprache, der

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<sup>231</sup> See Jank Messner, “Gibt es in Kärnten immer noch Windische?” in *Am Kärntner Wesen könnte diese Republik genesen: an den rechten Rand Europas--Jörg Haiders Erneuerungspolitik*, ed. Gero Fischer and Peter Gstettner (Klagenfurt: Drava, 1990), 90-95.

<sup>232</sup> Teodor Domej, *Austria Slovenica: die Kärntner Slovenen und die Nation Österreich*. (Klagenfurt: Verlag Hermagoras, 1996), 65. See also Martin Wutte, “Deutsch - windisch – slowenisch,” in *Kampf um Kärnten [1918 - 1920]* ed. Josef Friedrich Perkonig, (Klagenfurt: Kärntner Heimatbund: 1927/1930).

Bräuche und Sitten. Sie bilden eine Brücke, und ihre Pfeiler sitzen gut und friedlich drüben und herüben.<sup>233</sup>

No bias towards the German Carinthians is found here, instead the mere existence of a people who cannot be assigned to either side is eradicating cultural borders (“Sie bilden eine Brücke, und ihre Pfeiler sitzen gut und friedlich drüben und herüben”).

Equally antagonistic is the passage of pan-Slavic romanticization that follows, and which initiates Bachmann’s affinity for the Slavic elements and eastern territories of the former Habsburg Empire that continues to surface in her later writings. Slovenian characters appear in her first published short story, “Die Fähre“ (the ferry man Josip Poje, the Slovenian girl Marija), as well as in her last published piece of prose, “Drei Wege zum See“ (Branco), and before that in “Ein Schritt nach Gomorrah” (Mara). In *Malina*, the male character Ivan is said to come “von der jugoslawischen Grenze,” which seems to disappoint the female protagonist who took him for a Serb from Belgrade. Also, a displaced Serb has a prominent role in one of the radio scripts that Bachmann wrote for the popular show *Die Radiofamilie* during her time at the American-supervised radio station Rot-Weiss-Rot – this will be discussed in more detail later on. Finally, Bachmann’s travels to Czechoslovakia and Poland appear to have left a profound impact on her, inspiring some of her most famous poetry (“Böhmen liegt am Meer,” “Prag Jänner 64”) and culminating in the hyperbolic appropriation of Slavic identity.<sup>234</sup> Such essentialist statements have to be read in the context of both Cold War politics and her ethical gesture of taking sides with the victims of World War II, for example European

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<sup>233</sup> Bachmann, *Das Honditschkreuz*, 491.

<sup>234</sup> “[...] ich bin ja eine Slawin, und Slawen sind anders [...] und ich gehöre dort hin.” Ingeborg Bachmann and Gerda Haller, *Ein Tag wird kommen. Gespräche in Rom. Ein Porträt von Gerda Haller*. With an afterword by Hans Höller (Salzburg: Verlag Jung und Jung, 2004), 64.

Jews or the Polish people, the first nation to be attacked and conquered by Hitler's troops. Even though she vehemently rejects the exploitation of victim status, she does explore the experience of victimhood in her prose, since the inquiry into the fate of the victim is part of the ethical obligation she sees in writing.<sup>235</sup> Furthermore, I believe they can be interpreted as an avowal of diversification against the reality of post 1918 curtailed Austria, specifically the provincial confinement that the author experienced in her youth. Interestingly enough, the young Bachmann overcomes the strict separation of Habsburg Austria and Russia, which is so prominent in Habsburg writers like Joseph Roth, whose influence on her work has been well documented:<sup>236</sup>

Sie nennen die Gail Zila und haben noch viel Wundersames und Geheimnisvolles in ihrem Tun. Ihre Lieder sind wie vom Traum einer größeren Weite getragen und klingen über die überall nahen Berge hinweg, so bestrickend und mit dem Wasser der Zila fließend, wie es die Lieder des unendlichen Rußlands täten.<sup>237</sup>

The Carinthian Slovenes are depicted as the exotic element of the region, which at the same time contributes to its cultural expansion, reaching all the way to the Slavic motherland Russia, imbuing the land with a mythical dimension that does not show up in relationship to the Austrian natives. That this "otherness" is connoted positively is also emphasized through Mate Banul's demonstrative self-identification as Slovenian instead of "Windischer" (which sets him apart from the German-friendly Slovenes championed by Perkonig): "Es war eine besondere Eitelkeit von Mate Banul, sich als Slowen

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<sup>235</sup> See Ingeborg Bachmann, "Auf das Opfer darf sich keiner berufen," in *Die Wahrheit ist den Menschen zumutbar. Essays, Reden, kleinere Schriften* (Munich: Piper, 1981), 135.

<sup>236</sup> See Almut Dippel, "Österreich - das ist etwas, das immer weitergeht für mich." *Zur Fortschreibung der "Trotta"-Romane Joseph Roths in Ingeborg Bachmanns Simultan*. (Mannheim: Röhrig Verlag, 1995).

<sup>237</sup> Ibid..

bezeichnen zu lassen.” Banul defies the category of the assimilated “Windische” by embodying the stereotype of the Slovene misfit. A jester and know-it-all, he is presented as greedy, opportunistic, fond of gossip and physically revolting. Always on the lookout for good stories, he does not mind stretching the truth for his listener’s entertainment. His “bridging” capacity shows up through independence and flexibility: whether the French or the Austrians are in power is of no concern to him as long as his own needs are met, which is why he is indifferent to politics. His nomadic profession and peculiar ethnic identity make him a misfit who does not seem to be bound to any community.

These contradicting imageries at the beginning of the text – folkloristic romanticization of the Slovene minority on one hand, almost satirical portrayal of a Slovenian character on the other – are part of an oppositional pattern that runs through the entire novella. The varying narrative focalization is an important factor here, since it presents the reader both with the perspective of individual villagers (when Banul communicates with others) and a more distanced narrator overseeing the events, who acknowledges the multi-ethnic make-up of Carinthia, of which this scrawny messenger is an important part. In fact, Mate Banul’s propensity for story telling, assessing situations and judging individual characters without getting involved himself makes him the equivalent of the external narrator on the diegetic plane. Due to his quick wit and honesty, albeit lack of tact, Banul has been read as a Homeric narrator in subversive modern disguise, which violates the dictates of the reactionary “Heimatroman.”<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>238</sup> See Peter Beicken, “So eine Geschichte ist ja ein Gewebe.” Zum Schreiben Ingeborg Bachmanns, in *Ingeborg Bachmann. Neue Richtungen in der Forschung? Internationales Kolloquium Saranac Lake, June 6 -9, 1991*, ed. Gudrun Brokoph-Mauch and Annette Daigger (St.Ingberg: Röhrig Universitätsverlag, 1995), 16-18.

The fact that the novella also figures as a kind of failed rural *Bildungsroman*, casting a troubled glance at the transition from youth to adulthood, shakes the very foundations of the *Heimatroman*, which is built on childhood nostalgia. For the home that Brandstetter yearns for is no longer attainable, not just because of foreign occupation, but because he himself has outgrown it – in this sense, *Honditschkreuz* symbolizes the loss of childhood idyll, which is a recurring theme in Bachmann's early writings and remains crucial for her later work.<sup>239</sup> When the farmer's son returns unexpectedly, he is not welcomed with enthusiasm. Not only has he become estranged from his father and the daily chores of a farmer, but this rift becomes even deeper when he decides to join the anti-Napoleonic forces towards the end of the novella, instead of redeeming the 'prodigal son.' In a symbolic scene towards the end of the novella, which foreshadows Bachmann's disillusioned treatment of nature in her first book of poetry *Die gestundete Zeit* (1953), the familiar turns uncanny as the beloved landscape of the Gail valley rebukes Brandstetter's hopes for a return to his childhood:

Ein Wind kam scharf von Süden, er trug den Sand der Gail im Munde und trieb ihn in die Augen, daß sie schmerzten und sich röteten. Er schüttelte die Wälder, daß die Stämme in Ohnmächten kreisten und die Blätter zitternd klagten. Es gab ein aufpeitschendes Brausen [...]. Franz Brandstetter meinte, getreten zu werden und empfand in seiner Stimmung doppelt die Barschheit der Natur, die ihm das Schicksal versinnbildlichte. Er fand sich schwach vor ihr und keuchte.<sup>240</sup>

Two components of the 'Heimatroman' are deconstructed here: a pure, bucolic natural environment that bears the essence of the homogenous "Volk" that inhabits it, which is

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<sup>239</sup> Joseph McVeigh, "'My Father,...I Would Not Have Betrayed You...'" Reshaping the Familial Past in Ingeborg Bachmann's *Radiofamilie*-Texts," *New German Critique*, No. 93, Austrian Writers Confront the Past (Autumn, 2004): 131-143.

<sup>240</sup> Bachmann, *Honditschkreuz*, 550

why it needs to be protected and claimed, as well as an idealized concept of belonging and national collectivity. Apart from the fact that Perkonig and other *Heimatliteratur* were immensely popular in Carinthia when Bachmann was growing up, it seems that the idea for *Honditschkreuz* was directly inspired by Bachmann's father, who gave her a history book on the liberation of Carinthia, suggesting that she might base her next story on it.<sup>241</sup>

It is significant that Bachmann's concluding sentence mentions the 1813 liberation of the Gail valley in a wider context of the freed "Illyrian provinces" in the Habsburg empire, which included at that time Carinthia, Istria, Dalmatia, Croatia, Slovenia and part of Tirol,<sup>242</sup> thus placing the geographical focus again on the eastern and Slavic fringes of old Austria: "Die Chronik von Hermagor weiß zu berichten, daß die illyrischen Provinzen und damit das Gailtal am 17. Oktober desselben Jahres mit der Völkerschlacht bei Leipzig als erobert erklärt wurden."<sup>243</sup> Quite pointedly, the anti-hero Franz Brandstetter does not contribute to this victory, but instead dies a meaningless, accidental death about a month before, when he and the French captain Maroni shoot each other in a moment of confusion, far away from the actual battlefield. Bachmann's ambivalent reflection on the genre of *Heimatliteratur*, as well as her own Carinthian legacy are captured quite pointedly by her close friend, the composer Hans-Werner

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<sup>241</sup> Hoell, *Ingeborg Bachmann*, 30. The book Bachmann used was *Alt-Hermagor. Geschichtliche Erinnerungen* (1930) by Hubert Piteschnigg.

<sup>242</sup> Peter Henninger points to this important territorial fact in his essay, 141.

<sup>243</sup> Bachmann, *Honditschkreuz*, 598.

Henze, during a meeting of the *Gruppe 47* in October 1952. Henze relates their first meeting in the following way:

In der ersten Kaffeepause fragte ich sie, ob sie auch schreibe, oder ob sie, wie ich, nur als Beobachter zugegen sei? Nein, sie schreibe schon, sagte sie, und zwar vorwiegend Heimatromane – da sie aus Kärnten stamme, sei das ja nur natürlich. Deshalb lehne sie die Moderne, wie sie hier vorgeführt werde, auch ab, als Asphaltliteratur [...].<sup>244</sup>

Bachmann knew that her rural origins made her vulnerable to prejudices from the postwar literary establishment, and she responded to them through a radical affirmation that was part satire, part self-awareness. The passage above becomes even more ironic if we consider Bachmann's criticism of the *Gruppe 47* for not being politically courageous enough and therefore channeling many of the reactionary tendencies that had already played into the hands of Nazi cultural propaganda -- which coined the derogatory term "Asphaltliteratur" quoted above.<sup>245</sup>

Multiethnic Carinthia, alternating with the capital Vienna, would remain Bachmann's miniature formula for Old Austria until her late prose, and both topographies, the urban and the rural, would evoke similarly conflicting feelings of allegiance and repulsion in her. The disruptive elements in her early writings on her childhood home prefigure her later treatment of the Habsburg past, which has received much critical attention since the 1980s. This becomes clear among other things, in her more trivial treatment of postwar daily life in a radio show for which she wrote scripts. *Die Radiofamilie* was an immensely popular show in the 1950s, developed and hosted at the

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<sup>244</sup> Hoell, *Ingeborg Bachmann*, 72.

<sup>245</sup> For criticism on *Gruppe 47*, see Weigel, *Hinterlassenschaften*, 279 ff, on "Asphaltliteratur," see Sebastian Graeb-Könneker, *Literatur im Dritten Reich. Dokumente und Texte* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2001).



station Rot-Weiß-Rot under American tutelage, with a clear re-educational agenda in mind. It was conceptualized by Bachmann and her co-author Jörg Mauthe (the third regular contributor of *Radiofamilie* scripts was Peter Weiser) and followed the daily lives of a presumably average bourgeois Viennese family, the Florianis. Bachmann's script writing for *Radiofamilie* remained a secret for more than sixty years, since she had explained in interviews that she had worked for Rot Weiß Rot only as an editor, "mit dem Rotstift."<sup>246</sup> Though Bachmann downplayed her participation in what she must have considered soap opera writing for strategic reasons (already half a year before she left Vienna first for Germany, and then for Rome, she expressed frustration about not being taken seriously as a young writer), her witty and to the point descriptions of postwar culture in Austria indicate that they quickly became something more than a bothersome journalistic task. Even if written with the objective of light-hearted entertainment, the radio scripts demonstrate elements of irony in the treatment of Cold War realities: Bachmann and her colleagues were given surprising lenience with their subject explorations and reflected on De-Nazification, the occupying forces, the rebuilding of Austria and the struggling economy, but Bachmann's scripts also clearly captured typical Austrian trivial myths, the chief one being Habsburg nostalgia and its commemoration of a past golden era.

The *Radiofamilie* scripts are valuable not just for their originality and critical undertones, but also because they present us with a shade of Bachmann's authorship that is almost non-existent in the work she published during her lifetime: satire and irony. The

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<sup>246</sup> Bachman as quoted in Joseph Mc Veigh, *Ingeborg Bachmann as Radio Scriptwriter*, *The German Quarterly*, Vol. 75, No. 1 (Winter, 2002), 35.

format of a popular show allowed her to capture mundane aspects of Viennese life (going to the theater, visiting a modern art exhibition, Christmas shopping etc.) as well as the creation of certain archetypes of postwar society (the naïve ex-Nazi, the diligently working judge and family man, the progressive house wife, etc.) which would never appeared in such hyperbolic form in her prose. They also show that Bachmann, who has often been identified as resistance writer, or at least, an erudite “Gesellschaftskritikerin,” even if she shied away from making blunt political statements, had a talent for conveying political and social challenges by packaging them in humor. Since the show was directed at a popular audience, these could naturally not be presented in great depth: Ruth Klüger acknowledges the young authors knack for the Viennese jargon or “wienerische[s] Geschwätz,” even if she dismisses it as “in einen dünnen Blätterteig von leicht verdaulicher Sozial- und Kulturkritik gewickelt.”<sup>247</sup> But read in the light of trivial myths in the sense of Roland Barthes, and with the demands of the mass medium of radio in mind, these pieces of ‘literary pop art’ do reveal Bachmann’s perception of certain cultural myths more clearly, precisely because they were written under the umbrella of anonymity.

The character of the former illegal Nazi uncle Guido is the most conspicuous example for Bachmann’s treatment of the recent past: Though he is quite successful as an owner of a chicken farm on the outskirts of Vienna, he always strives to prove his hidden genius to those around him. His idealism repeatedly clashes with reality, making him the object of (benevolent) ridicule for the Floriani children, who actually prefer Guido to their own father, Hans, a conscientious but boring bureaucrat. Guido, however, is also a

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<sup>247</sup> Ruth Klüger, “Ingeborg Bachmanns Seifenoper,” *Die Welt*, May 21, 2011.

fallen figure – like Bachmann’s father, he was an illegal Nazi before 1938, but unlike Matthias Bachmann, he became quickly disillusioned with the party’s ideology and withdrew his membership soon after the “Anschluss.” In the first episode that Guido is introduced, (“Geld borgen, Guido”), the entanglement of Nazi ideology with the German literary canon is used to reveal his precarious involvement:

Guido: In mir war immer etwas Faustisches, ein deutsches Schicksal, ja...

Hans: Erwinnere mich lieber nicht an dein deutsches Schicksal. Du weißt, in dem Punkt bin ich empfindlich. Nach wie vor.

Guido: Bitte, bitte, ich hab halt zuerst geglaubt daß die sozusagen den Nihilismus des 20. Jahrhunderts überwinden würden. Aufrichtig gesagt, wie hättest du denn reagiert, wenn sie dich nicht gleich hinausgeschmissen hätten im ’38er Jahr. Du mußt doch zugeben, daß man damals sehr – wie drücke ich mich aus – empfänglich war, und war ich dann nicht unter den ersten, die sich betont distanziert haben, was? Und hab ich euch einen Augenblick im Stich gelassen? No also....<sup>248</sup>

What is captured in this dialogue is the apologetic discourse of the postwar years in Austria, dominated by seemingly harmless ex-Nazis like Guido, but of course also continued sympathizers who never made it into the cast of the *Radiofamilie*. Most perspicuous is the exclusive attribution of Nazism to the other side – Guido’s “deutsches Schicksal” is not only considered an aberration, but also as an embarrassment that is preferably avoided in public discourse (“Erinnere mich lieber nicht [...]).

The correspondence between Jack Hamesh and Ingeborg Bachmann suggests that shortly after leaving for Vienna, the aspiring author was distressed over the unchanged ideological structures she faced in her first year at the university. Though her own letters could not be recovered, her struggle can be deducted from Hamesh’s encouraging words:

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<sup>248</sup> Bachmann, *Radiofamilie*, 16.

“Deine Zweifel sind allzuverständlich, in diesen ideologischen Ringen wird so mancher unterliegen, gar manche Enttäuschung wird dich noch quälen, aber es ist deine Zukunft. Unsere Welt!”<sup>249</sup> In the same letter, Hamesh also comments disparagingly on the “Wienkult” of the time, which is restituting the golden era of the city as an escapist fantasy that he emphatically rejects: “So wie es war soll es und kann es nicht mehr werden. Aber ein neues Wien soll und muss erstehen, ein freies fortschrittliches [...] ...nicht nur neue Häuser. Denn geistiger und moralischer Schutt sind viel schwieriger wegzuräumen, da hilft keine Arbeitspflicht, sondern ein Erziehungswerk, eine politische Aufklärung, [...] und nicht Flucht ins mystische.”<sup>250</sup> Little did he know that Bachmann would be actively contributing to the American re-education program, albeit with mixed feelings, soon thereafter. The failure of de-Nazification would later appear in a much more pronounced way in her short story “Unter Mördern und Irren,” which shows Vienna as a powder keg of repressed trauma, where Jewish victims and former Nazis are living together on the edge of insanity.<sup>251</sup>

Priding himself of his “universal education”<sup>252</sup>, which he deems lost in postwar society, Guido is a parody on the Austrian intellectual who believes that European humanism is able to remedy the perceived decay of values in modernity. It is this very same longing for values and stability that the cultural propagandists of Nazism took

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<sup>249</sup> letter from Jack Hamesh to Ingeborg Bachmann dated 1.11.46 in Tel-Aviv. Ingeborg Bachmann, *Kriegstagebuch. Mit Briefen von Jack Hamesh an Ingeborg Bachmann*, ed. Hans Höller (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2010), 50-51.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>251</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, “Unter Mördern und Irren,” in *Werke 2*. 159-186.

<sup>252</sup> Bachmann, *Radiofamilie*, 16.

advantage of when recruiting followers. Joseph McVeigh has decoded Guido's complaint about "nihilism" as a direct reference to a paper Bachmann wrote at the University of Vienna on Alfred Weber's *Abschied von der Geschichte? Die Überwindung des Nihilismus*.<sup>253</sup> The popularity of Nazism, she argued, was intrinsically connected to a perceived nihilism in the interwar years, which makes the post-war return to European ideals as proposed by Weber highly problematic – after all, Fascist propaganda had successfully exploited the longing for a "New Europe" rooted in occidental tradition.<sup>254</sup> While Guido acknowledges his error and feels redeemed by his engagement for the family, the reactionary humanist resurfaces in another episode, "Unliebsamer Panigl." Dr. Panigl, a blasé and philistine colleague of Hans Floriani is invited to dinner at the family's home. Besides lacking any social empathy and talking incessantly to demonstrate his expertise in all subjects, he also brings his narrow-minded fiancée, who is a post office employee and admirer of Wagner. Bachmann uses the character of Panigl to satirize art historian Hans Sedlmayr, a former professor at the university of Vienna and author of *Verlust der Mitte* (composed between 1941 and 1944, published in 1948), a compendium against the decadence of modern art. Panigl parrots Sedlmayr's lament, whose writings remained very influential until the 1960s:<sup>255</sup> "Der Verlust der Mitte – ja, blicken Sie um sich: überall das Zeichen des Verfalls, in der Kunst, in der Moral, in der

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<sup>253</sup> Joseph McVeigh, "Reshaping the Familial Past in Ingeborg Bachmann's *Radiofamilie*-Texts," 2004, 138.

<sup>254</sup> See Otto Gerhard Oexle, "Leitbegriffe – Deutungsmuster – Paradigmenkämpfe. Über Vorstellungen vom >Neuen Europa< in Deutschland 1944," in *Nationalsozialismus in den Kulturwissenschaften*, ed. Otto Gerhard Oexle and Hartmut Lehman (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 13-40.

<sup>255</sup> See Oliver Rathkolb, "Nazi-Ästhetik und die »Ostmark«," in *Die >österreichische< nationalsozialistische Ästhetik*, ed. Ilija Dürreimer and Pia Janke (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2003), 1-32.

Wissenschaft! Alle Wege sind zu Seitenwegen geworden.”<sup>256</sup> But the Florianis do not agree, setting an example against the “susceptibility” Hugo postulated for the Nazi period: Hans Floriani jumps to the defense of modern art, even though he admits not to be very familiar with it, and the precocious Floriani children plot how to scare the “tactless” and “stupid” guests away.<sup>257</sup>

The glorification of the Habsburg past is put under similar scrutiny in two other scripts, though with radically different results. In the episode “Erzherzog Guido,” the trivial symbols of the Empire are ridiculed, when the eccentric uncle is debunked as a Habsburg nostalgic: Convinced that he was mixed up at birth, he fancies himself to be the secret offspring of prince Rudolf, making him “Anwärter auf den Thron eines Reiches sozusagen, das nicht mehr existiert, Träger einer unsichtbaren Krone gewissermaßen,”<sup>258</sup> Guido proceeds to claim certain status symbols of Habsburg rule: the right to an apartment in Schönbrunn, a ring with the royal seal, and finally, a grave in the Kapuzinergruft.<sup>259</sup> These ludicrous fantasies are countered by his nephew’s witty observation: “Aber warum denn in der Kapuzinergruft? Das ist doch mehr ein Museum für Fremde.” Bachmann sheds a light on how widespread references to this golden age of Austria were in the bleak days of the postwar years, when invocations of the formerly vast space of the empire provided escape from a perceived provinciality and drastically reduced territorial space. When the clever Helli points out that the birth dates of her uncle

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<sup>256</sup> Bachmann, *Radiofamilie*, 192.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

and prince Rudolf's heir lie almost thirty years apart, this leads to Guido's highly comical re-enactment of the fall of the empire: "Oh Österreich, altes, verklingendes Österreich, dahin, dahin! Dein getreuester Sohn. widerlegt. Der Untergang eines großen und herrlichen Reiches...er hat geschlagen."<sup>260</sup> The attentive Wolferl, however, brings him back to present day reality: "Wir sind doch ein kleines Land und kein großes Reich, aber untergehen tun wir noch lange nicht, Onkel Guido." This too, can be read as Bachmann's tongue-in-cheek response to those Austrian traditionalists whose complaint about the modern decadence ("Verlust der Mitte") is accompanied by an imaginary restoration of the old geographical borders.

Finally, the *Radiofamilie* episode "Der D.P.," based on the most elaborate script by Bachmann for the show, touches upon a different question of the Habsburg myth – what is the fate of the Empire's marginal ethnicities, now and then? The Florianis are visited by a Serbian textile peddler who has been displaced as a result of the war – therefore, a displaced person, or "D.P". The presence of D.P. camps, mostly for Jewish survivors but also refugees from the former Yugoslavia and Soviet occupied territories was part of Austrian postwar life until the late 1950s. Hans Floriani recognizes the D.P., who is only addressed as Mihailowitsch, as someone he just recently convicted of fraud, and now witnesses during another criminal activity. As the judge listens to Mihailowitsch's story, trying to decide what to do with him, they are joined by his judiciary colleague Wotruba, who is of Czech origin. Austrian listeners would immediately associate the name with that of the sculptor Fritz Wotruba, who created both well-known antiwar monuments in Vienna, as well as pioneered geometrical abstraction

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<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 179.

in his art pieces. Bachmann thus opens the discussion on ethnic diversity in postwar Austria by subtly referencing the debate on modern art from previous episodes, weaving a network of cross-references, which is typical for her work. The episode is prepared by a careful genealogical analysis of the Floriani family:

Meine Damen und Herren – Sie kennen sicherlich alle das schöne Sprichwort: Drei Wiener gibt's nicht – weil immer ein Böhm dabei ist.[...] Die meisten Stammbäume der Wiener verlieren sich irgendwo im Sudetenland oder in Mähren, oder in der Krain oder in Siebenbürgen oder weiß Gott wo – irgendwo in den weiten Ländern des ehemaligen österreichisch-ungarischen Vielvölkerreichs. In der Familie Floriani steht's damit auch nicht anders. [Die Mutter] war eine geborene Radokovic – ihre Familie dürfte also vermutlich aus der Krain gestammt haben – und der Vatername Floriani kommt ja wohl auch eher aus Triest als aus Groß-Gerungs. Zwischen Wien und den Nachfolgestaaten[...] laufen auch heute noch die feinen Fäden der Verwandtschaft und die vielen Erinnerungen an Zeiten, die vielleicht wirklich schöner gewesen sind.<sup>261</sup>

In spite of the postulated hybrid status and familial interconnectedness of all Austrians, the episode goes on to show that there *are* in fact differences for Slavic minorities in postwar Austria, and that they already existed during the Empire. The life stories of Wotruba and Mihailowitsch are juxtaposed in parallel narratives to demonstrate why the Bohemian peasant found success in Vienna at the turn of the century, while the city offered nothing but misery to the Serb Mihailowitsch about two generations later. The self made man Wotruba claims that he met “vernünftige [sic] und anständige Menschen” when first arriving in Vienna, in spite of being beaten by the police,<sup>262</sup> which is contrasted to Mihailowitsch's claim that the war has destroyed the myth of the “goldene[s] Wienerherz:” “Wien ist ja im Krieg zu einer armen Stadt geworden. Und auch zu einer bösen Stadt, wenigstens kommt es mir so vor. Viel Freude hab ich nicht

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 147



erlebt in Wien [...]. Die Menschen? Ich hab sie kennengelernt. Sie lächeln, weil sie sich sagen: Der ist noch jung und schon so zynisch, was? Schlecht sind sie.”<sup>263</sup> The Serb’s disillusionment is rooted in a deeply traumatic experience: his parents, a Serbian teacher of German, and his Viennese wife, were murdered by the Croatian Ustaša, and he became involved in the Partisan movement to fight against fascism as a university student. When he raised suspicions against the party line, he was first imprisoned and later sent to a forced labor camp in Vienna.<sup>264</sup>

The character of Mihailowitsch echoes the life lines of Milo Dor, a Serbian friend and fellow writer of Bachmann’s at *Café Raimund* in Vienna, and later at the Gruppe 47 in Germany. Dor came to Vienna as a forced laborer, and was active in the Communist resistance during his youth. This might explain why Bachmann demonstrates detailed historical knowledge about the political situation in the territory of Socialist Yugoslavia during the war: The D.P. mentions that he was fighting against Ustashas, Germans and Czarist Tschetniks, and links rising Communist fanaticism to the casualties in the camps and on the Balkan front: “Sie müssen wissen, von vierzehn Millionen Jugoslawen haben zwei Millionen den Krieg nicht überlebt...”<sup>265</sup> When Hans Floriani first identifies Mihailowitsch as Croatian (“Diese kroatischen Namen sind auch schwer zu behalten!”), and the D.P. vehemently objects (“Serbisch, bitte”), Bachmann plays on the general public’s ignorance not only about the South Slavs, but more importantly the political constellations of the recent world war (e.g. the Croatians being Nazi allies who

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>265</sup> Ibid., 150.

persecuted the Serbs), in which Austrian Fascists played a crucial role. Naturally, the format of the show does not allow for more than a few critical allusions, but even these go further than one might expect. For instance, the divisions of the Cold War are illustrated subtly, on the family level, when Wotruba remembers his nephew in Prague, who has been imprisoned for oppositional activism. Recalling friends in Budapest, Vilma sympathizes with the fate of the former eastern provinces, now under Soviet occupation: “Ach das geht ins Uferlose, und wir sind hier nur ein paar, die in Sorge sind. Aber die vielen, vielen Hunderttausende und Millionen....”<sup>266</sup> The borders of Austria might have been rewritten decades ago, but the old spirit of the destroyed Empire still allows for a happy ending: Recognizing himself as a young man in the Serbian D.P., Wotruba offers Mihailowitsch work and lodging as a tribute to old allegiances: “Mir stammens alle aus dem Vielvelkerreich (sic), das man mutwillig zerschlagen hat....”<sup>267</sup> And the *Radiofamilie* would not be a true family show if the bitter outlook of Mihailowitsch were not successfully transformed by this act of generosity.

Bachmann’s *Radiofamilie* scripts, though far from radical in their message, demonstrate her keen awareness of common cultural myths and debates in the early 1950s in Austria, which she recognized as responses to the country’s fascist tendencies since 1918, after the end of multiethnic Empire. In any case, these examples confirm that Bachmann’s reflections on the Habsburg myth were quite diverse and not just demonstrations of melancholy longing, as which the well-known passage on the “house of Austria” in the novel *Malina* has been interpreted:

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid., 158.

Am liebsten war mir immer der Ausdruck „das Haus Österreich“, denn er hat mir besser erklärt, was mich bindet als alle anderen Ausdrücke, die man mir anzubieten hatte. Ich muß gelebt haben in diesem Haus zu verschiedenen Zeiten, denn ich erinnere mich sofort, in den Gassen von Prag und im Hafen von Triest, ich träume auf böhmisch, auf windisch, auf bosnisch, ich war immer zu Hause in diesem Haus und, außer im Traum, in diesem geträumten Haus, ohne die geringste Lust, es noch einmal zu bewohnen, in seinen Besitz zu gelangen, einen Anspruch zu erheben, denn die Kronländer sind an mich gefallen, ich habe abgedankt, ich habe die älteste Krone in der Kirche am Hof niedergelegt [...].<sup>268</sup>

There are several layers to this seemingly nostalgic excerpt, which need to be read more closely to understand what Bachmann is doing here. First of all, a personal, subjective preference for the term “Haus Österreich,” is affirmed, as well as the narrator’s commitment to it (“was mich bindet“). She refers to the cultural debate on the Habsburg past by mentioning other definitions that have been offered to her, suggesting that the choice of her own term is the result of both external and internal dialogues. The metaphor of the house is more concrete than geographical or genealogical terms (*Mitteleuropa*, *Altösterreich*, or Musil’s satirical “Kakanien”) and it is physically accessible. Already in the next line, however, it is transposed to a literary, utopian level, when the narrator moves into a collective identity, which harbors ‘memories’ of inhabiting this “house.” Different times and locations (“zu verschiedenen Zeiten,” “Prag,” “Triest”) as well as languages indicate that it is not the singular, limited “I,” which is experiencing the history of Austria, but a collectivity that transcends time and space. The languages that are referred to as “böhmisch, windisch, bosnisch“ each connote a former region of the Habsburg Empire and do not exist under these terms anymore – in postwar Austria, they are now identified as Czech, Slovenian and Serbo-Croatian. Furthermore, this “house,” i.e. Austria’s multiethnic past, can only be accessed in dreams or, as Bachmann’s literary

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<sup>268</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, “*Todesarten*”-Projekt. *Kritische Ausgabe*, ed. Robert Pichl, Monika Albrecht and Dirk Göttsche (Munich; Zürich: Piper 1978), 397.

imaginaries show – through art. While accessing this memory is important to the narrator, since it determines her present, she renounces all claims to its return in reality (“ohne die geringste Lust, es noch einmal zu bewohnen”). Bachmann’s two-directional stance towards her Austrian legacy – the necessity to remember and the refusal to get lost in that memory – is captured in the fact that even though the crown lands have been bestowed to the narrator, she consciously cedes them through her “abdication.”

Bachmann’s final collection of short stories, *Simultan* (1972) contains a text that has prompted the most numerous analyses of Habsburg topographies in her work to date: “Drei Wege zum See.” While important observations have been made about the story’s implementation of motifs and characters from Joseph Roth’s novels *Radetzky* and *Kapuzinergruft* (incidentally two classical examples for the “Habsburg Myth” as postulated by Magris) its references to Bachmann’s own fusion of the literary border region of Galicia and her childhood utopia in the borderland of Carinthia,<sup>269</sup> as well as a continued romanticized of Slovenian characters,<sup>270</sup> a reading that ties together all these essential references with the concrete political backdrop of the text will most clearly foreground Bachmann’s importance for the discourse of Central Europe. “Drei Wege zum See” weaves together, in nearly-novella length, almost all strands of Bachmann’s motifs and ethical questions over several decades of writing in one text, and, being the last piece of prose published during her life time, constitutes a key text for her literary legacy. The plot itself is quickly told: Elisabeth Matrei, a journalist and photographer

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<sup>269</sup> Sigrid Weigel, *Hinterlassenschaften unter Wahrung des Briefgeheimnisses*, 520-522.

<sup>270</sup> See Neva Šlibar-Hojker, “Entgrenzung, Mythos, Utopie. Die Bedeutung der slowenischen Elemente im Oeuvre Ingeborg Bachmanns,” *Acta Neophilologica* 17. *Ingeborg Bachmann*, Ljubljana (1984): 33-44.

from Klagenfurt who now lives in Paris, returns to her native Carinthia to visit her elderly father, pondering over her life and lost loves, as she unsuccessfully explores different hiking paths to lead her back to the lake just outside town, where she used to go for summer day trips as a child. The motif of an attempted return to the sites of childhood is the same as in the youth novella *Honditschkreuz* and the early short story “Jugend in einer österreichischen Stadt“ (1961). I have already demonstrated how the former serves to question reactionary concepts of *Heimat*: the latter, written from an adult perspective, paints the rift between childhood and adult life, now tainted by the trauma of war, in even gloomier strokes: “Du mein Ort, du kein Ort, über Wolken, unter Karst...”<sup>271</sup> The returnee experiences the former home town as only one among many stops on the route of an uprooted life, where not even memory can yield enlightenment: “Im bewegungslosen Erinnern, vor der Abreise, vor allen Abreisen, was soll uns aufgehen?”<sup>272</sup> As a contrast, “Drei Wege zum See“ is built around the protagonist’s incessant process of remembering, constructing a topography of recalled pain, which, as much as it is personally tied to Elisabeth, opens up venues to reflect on collectively experienced political and historical issues. Bachmann thus irrevocably ties the private to the political, traces of which first appeared in her prose collection *Das dreißigste Jahr* and grew into full form through the equation of fascist violence with abuse in relationships in her novel *Malina* (1970), long before the feminist movement made it part of its self-representation. Elisabeth’s observation that all locations of her past are tainted by grievances (“Es gab überhaupt

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<sup>271</sup> Bachmann, “Drei Wege zum See,” 91.

<sup>272</sup> *Ibid.*.

keine Orte mehr [...] die ihr nicht wehtaten,<sup>273</sup>) is part of the greater dysfunctional structures of postwar life that generate individual alienation and cruelty. The journalist Elisabeth is affected as much by patriarchal and sexist bosses, lovers and friends, as by the commodification of human suffering through sensationalist media, or the hegemonic relationship between capitalist west and conflicted border zones (be they Algiers, Vietnam, or the Soviet bloc). As an Austrian, she critically observes her country's glorification of the past, while at the same time refusing to believe in the promises of the future.<sup>274</sup>

A documentary-style description of a hiking map serves as a preamble to the narrative and highlights space as a crucial category: "Der Ursprung dieser Geschichte liegt im Topographischen, da der Autor dieser Karte glauben schenkte."<sup>275</sup> It is the map that the protagonist consults to arrive at the childhood lake, but which turns out to be unreliable due to recent highway constructions, a result of the booming tourist industry. The impossibility of homecoming, not just for the cosmopolitan outsider Elisabeth, who is estranged from provincial life, but also within the context of a painfully felt homelessness of (postwar) modernity is the thread that binds all of Elisabeth's memories

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<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 405.

<sup>274</sup> I have already pointed out the future-oriented public discourse in postwar Austrian society. Bachmann's rejection of a modernist myth of progress and futurity is expressed early on in the story, when Elisabeth thinks of her newly wed brother and his English wife: "Es kam ihr aber ein dumpfer Verdacht. Robert und Liz hatten keine Zukunft, sie hatten nur die Jugend, die Zukunft nicht. Elisabeth hatte ihre Zukunft nicht bekommen und ihre Eltern hatten sie nicht bekommen, es war nichts mit dieser Zukunft die immer allen jungen Leuten versprochen wurde." Bachmann, "Drei Wege zum See," 441.

<sup>275</sup> Ibid., 394.

in the story together. The shaky, unstable nature of space, however, is also reciprocally connected to the subjective uprootedness of the protagonist:

Daheim war sie nicht in diesem Wald, sie musste immer wieder neu anfangen, die Wanderkarten zu lesen, weil sie kein Heimweh kannte und es nie Heimweh war, das sie nachhause kommen ließ, nichts hatte sich je verklärt, sondern sie kam zurück, ihres Vaters wegen, und das war eine Selbstverständlichkeit für sie wie für Robert.<sup>276</sup>

For the speaker, home-sickness is associated with a distortive nostalgia, which she consciously rejects (“nichts hatte sich je verklärt“), but interestingly enough does not extend to familial obligations. It is through the figure of the father, then, who is called a Habsburg “relic,” that Bachmann’s rejection of the Habsburg myth is illustrated most clearly, as well as through the second major character, the emigrée Franz Joseph Trotta, Elisabeth’s “great love,” whom she meets in Paris and whose influence eventually leads her to adopt the identity of an “exterritorial” person like him. Both men are linked to well-known characters from Joseph Roth’s Habsburg trilogy: while the father is compared to “Leutnant Joseph Trotta,” who attained nobility after saving the emperor’s life in battle and is a staunch supporter of the monarchy in *Radetzky*, Elisabeth’s lover Franz Joseph Eugen Trotta is likened to his grand nephew, whose father revolted against the centralist empire and dreamed of a “Slavic kingdom” under Habsburg rule.<sup>277</sup> Roth’s trilogy ends with the young Trotta’s move to Paris and the Nazi takeover, and “Drei Wege zum See” has been read as Bachmann’s continuation of the Trotta saga and intertextual tribute to Roth.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid., 411-12.

<sup>277</sup> See Joseph Roth’s *Radetzky* and *Kapuzinergruft*.

<sup>278</sup> Dippel, “Österreich ist etwas das immer weitergeht für mich,” 10-15.

Though separated by generational lines and political convictions, both men are, for differing reasons, bound by the past. At closer examination, however, they defy the stereotypical labels that already bear satirical character in Roth. The father appears a rather old-fashioned figure at first: he insists on carrying his daughters suitcases, values his daily routine and is taken aback by the innovations of modernity (the telephone, highway constructions, contemporary journalism). Little is revealed about his past except that he witnessed the fall of the monarchy in 1914, and Sarajevo, the location which triggered the beginning of the first world war, is suggested as his personal *lieu de mémoire*: Upon her arrival, Elisabeth gifts her father an antique book about the city, which appears to touch him deeply: “[...] und er blätterte still darin, denn das ging ihn etwas an.”<sup>279</sup> Later on, when his own reclusiveness is contrasted to his daughter’s nomadic lifestyle, Sarajevo is mentioned as the only city, to which he travelled by himself after his wife passed away. And yet he is anything but a nostalgic – in spite of his confusion over contemporary Austrian society, he insists that the old Austria has been irrevocably lost already long before Hitler’s take-over 1938. He remains a skeptic,

[...] der alles mißbilligte, was noch so tat also ob, als ob von diesem Geist noch die Rede sein könnte, und er beharrte störrisch darauf, daß ein Irrtum der Geschichte nie berechtigt worden sei, daß das Jahr 1938 kein Einschnitt gewesen war, sondern der Riß weit zurücklag, alles danach eine Konsequenz des älteren Risses war, und daß seine Welt, die er doch kaum mehr recht gekannt hatte, 1914 endgültig vernichtet worden sei ....<sup>280</sup>

This critical perspective explains why Elisabeth, who strives to understand the past without glorifying it, becomes fond of her father’s stories as an adult, once she has abandoned all hopes for the future (“Für sie hatte es nur die Zukunft gegeben“). In a more

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<sup>279</sup> Bachmann, “Drei Wege zum See,” 400.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid., 454.



anachronistic move, the father is exposed as a voter for the Social Democrats, which he justifies with his belief in progress:

Er sagte mürrisch: Zur Beschleunigung! Und damit diese Hypokrisie aufhöre, denn er mochte nicht diesen Wigel-Wagel und Reminiszenzen, denn was er erinnerte, war etwas ganz anderes, und das ging heute niemand mehr etwas an.<sup>281</sup>

Again, the discrepancy between the official postwar “reminiscences” and personal, (potentially painful) memories of war (“etwas ganz anderes”) is only alluded to, since it is “of no concern” for the present. The usage of the idiomatic phrase “jemanden etwas angehen” is ambivalent in the story: while the narrator uses it to express the father’s affirmative engagement in the case of imperial Sarajevo (“das ging ihn etwas an”) it serves to distance him from the postwar generation who he deems ‘not concerned’ with an accurate representation of the past because it chooses to believe in “hypocrisy.” The father’s allegiance to old Habsburg is thus decidedly disassociated from reactionary stances, since it appears to be more of an involuntary, haunting legacy than a retroactive utopia that can be juxtaposed to the present. It is not without coincidence that families such as the Matreis, are described as a dying dynasty<sup>282</sup> just like the Trotts (both Roth’s and Bachmann’s). Furthermore, it is only in the second generation of the Matrei children, Elisabeth and her brother Robert, that the “sensibility” for the empire’s legacy is linked,

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 454.

<sup>282</sup> “Denn sie wußte nur und auch genau, warum Familien wie die Matreis aussterben sollten, auch daß dieses Land keine Matreis mehr brauchte, daß schon ihr Vater ein Relikt war, und Robert und sie sich zwar in die Fremde gerettet hatten und tätig waren wie tätige Menschen in wichtigen Ländern, und Robert würde durch Liz noch sicherer in der Distanz werden.” Bachmann, “Drei Wege zum See,” 399.

as in Roth, to the periphery (“Das Wesen der Monarchie ist die Peripherie”<sup>283</sup>), and consequently their displacement in the postwar world:

Aber was sie zu Fremden machte überall, war ihre Empfindlichkeit, weil sie von der Peripherie kamen und daher ihr Geist, ihr Fühlen und Handeln hoffnungslos diesem Geisterreich von einer riesigen Ausdehnung gehörten, und es gab nur die richtigen Pässe für sie nicht mehr, weil dieses Land keine Pässe mehr ausstellte.”<sup>284</sup>

Elisabeth’s father may be resenting Habsburg nostalgia and voting for “Beschleunigung,” but his awareness of being out of place in the present does not result in the haunted nomadism and estrangement that dominates the second generation. Even though he, too, grew up in multicultural Carinthia and married a Slovenian (“die das harte Deutsch der Slawen gesprochen hatte,”<sup>285</sup>) he is stupefied by his children’s mobility and does not claim a border identity like Elisabeth. The existential crisis that overcomes Elisabeth when she rushes from one globalized metropolis to another, reporting on war from the margins of the so-called civilized world, is generated by the realization that the periphery has become part and parcel of the modern condition, in a reality which is increasingly fragmented, hardened, divided. When Elisabeth ponders over the downfall of the multicultural empire as she gazes in the direction of the “Dreiländereck,” a scene which has been quoted innumerable times to prove her melancholy yearning for a lost past, the subtle indicators of a disenchanting irony have to be taken into account. In order to get at

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<sup>283</sup>“Das Wesen Österreichs ist nicht Zentrum, sondern Peripherie,” Joseph Roth, *Die Kapuzinergruft* (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1967), 15.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 399.

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

the stylistic and intertextual piques of the passage most effectively, I am quoting it here in full:

[...] dort drüben hätte sie gerne gelebt, in einer Einöde an der Grenze, wo es noch Bauern und Jäger gab, und sie dachte unwillkürlich, daß sie auch so angefangen hätte: An meine Völker! Aber sie hätte sie nicht in den Tod geschickt und nicht diese Trennungen herbeigeführt, da sie doch gut miteinander gelebt hatten, immer natürlich in einem Mißverständnis, in Haß und Rebellion, aber man konnte von den Menschen wirklich nicht verlangen, daß sie sich von der Vernunft regieren ließen, und sie dachte belustigt an ihren Vater, der ganz ernsthaft erklärt hatte, es sei damals alles ganz und gar unvernünftig gewesen und sonderbar, und gerade das hätten alle verstanden, weil sie eben allesamt sonderbare Leute waren, und auch die Revolutionäre seien ganz erschrocken gewesen, wie es dieses verhaßte, aber mehr noch geliebte Riesenreich nicht mehr gab.<sup>286</sup>

Elisabeth's professed yearning for a home in an archaic no-mans-land ("wo es noch Bauern und Jäger gab") is not very credible, given that she makes dismissive remarks on provincial backwardness in Carinthia before<sup>287</sup> and is very clear about the fact that the bucolic landscapes of her childhood, along with the untainted lake, are gone ("Dieser See ist auch nicht mehr der See, der uns gehörte, sein Wasser schmeckt anders [...]"). The dreamy evocation of the borderland in the distance is taken by Bachmann as an opportunity to reflect critically on a scene that has already entered Austrian collective memory at the time of her writing: emperor Franz Joseph's war declaration in Bad Ischl on July 28, 1914, which started the first world war. When Elisabeth thus playfully puts herself in the place of the old emperor, who himself turned into a cultural icon and trivial myth in the postwar era, she attempts to revise a *lieu de mémoire* which is the source of precisely those "hypocritical reminiscences" that her father bemoans. Similarly, her claim

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., 444-45.

<sup>287</sup> See for instance Elisabeth's comment on the Carinthian resistance to modernity: "Schon Wien war ein höchst verdächtiger und dunkler Schauplatz für sie, und da sie sowieso so mißtrauisch waren, wenn aus dem Parlament etwas durchsickerte und Minister Erklärungen abgaben, mußte man sie vielleicht gar nicht noch mißtrauischer machen gegen den Rest einer großen vertrackten Zeit, die Gegenwart hieß." Ibid., 428.

that she would not have brought death and separation upon the k.u.k. nations, while at the same time debunking the myth of harmonious convivance (“da sie doch gut miteinander gelebt hatten“) which is juxtaposed to permanent discord (“Mißverständnis, in Haß und Rebellion“) has to be read as a sarcastic retort to those political utopians who are milling over the ‘what if’ questions of history. Her father’s insistence that contradiction and chaos were the natural state of the old empire echoes of course Robert Musil’s humorous “Kakanien” sketches in *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* – her “amusement” at such claims shows, however, that she rejects their interpretation in the service of nostalgia. Her case against human rationality (“[...] man konnte von den Menschen wirklich nicht verlangen, daß sie sich von der Vernunft regieren ließen“) is directed against the powerlessness of humanist Austrian intellectuals against the appeal of nationalism and warfare, both in 1914 and 1938. In the *Gulliver* essay mentioned earlier in this chapter, Bachmann alludes to the new challenge of *glocalization* and argues for an intercultural dialogue which is both rationally pragmatic in that it acknowledges national differences, but also eschews the naïve rhetoric of a global (literary) village:

Jetzt kann man sich getroster überlegen, was man zu sagen hat, jeder von seiner Provinz aus, von seinem Ort aus, an den die Welt (die anderen Provinzen also) gespült werden. Es sind weder Abgeschnittensein noch Einsamkeit da, die quälend und unfruchtbar sind, noch eine Vereinigungsgier mit allem und jedem, die auch quälend ist, sondern ein Einsetzen von Vernunft, von vernünftigem Auswählen, von Beschränken, vor allem aber von einer Aufmerksamkeit, auf die ich hinausmöchte, und durch die Sondieren, Reden und Dagegenreden erst sinnvoll werden können und Würde gewinnen können.<sup>288</sup>

In this case, a “provincial” perception does not stand for the narrow-mindedness so often ridiculed by the author when referring to her native Carinthia, instead it suggests that particularity and regionalism need to be considered when engaging in transnationalist

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<sup>288</sup> Bachmann, *Werke 4* (Munich: Piper, 1978), 71 -72.

imageries, both as threat and opportunity. Every province, after all, is bordered by another, and the “Einöde an der Grenze“ should be read within the context of a less self-aggrandizing cosmopolitanism. Not surprisingly, Elisabeth’s playful resuscitation of a Habsburg landscape is followed by the vehement rejection of nostalgia, without denying the importance of a “borderland consciousness“ for her moral identity: “Sie aber würde sich nicht mehr anstecken lassen von dieser Krankheit, die im Aussterben war, nur eines verleugnen konnte sie natürlich nicht, das war ihre Moral, denn ihre Moral kam von hier und nicht aus Paris und hatte nichts zu tun mit New York und kaum etwas mit Wien.”<sup>289</sup> By preferring borderland “morality” (“von hier,” of course, refers to Klagenfurt, the location of Elisabeth’s visit) to that of the globalized metropolis, Bachmann is suggesting that there are lessons to be learned from the limitations, but also the proximity of small-town borderland life, where ethnic hybridity is a phenomenon experienced on the community level, instead of the anonymous, diverse masses that horrify Elisabeth when she travels to London:

[...] die Gäste waren alle aus Asien und Afrika, in den großen Lifts fuhr sie inmitten einer schweigenden Menge mit, als einzige Weiße, und es war recht absonderlich hier, in der Nähe von Marble Arch und dem Hyde Park. Es war nie beklemmend gewesen in Asien oder Afrika, [...] aber hier nicht, es war alles stumpfsinnig, nichts stimmte, und die Gäste und Angestellten verständigten sich in einem Englisch, das auf eine geringe Anzahl an Wendungen beschränkt war [...] es war nicht eine lebende Sprache, sondern ein Esperanto.”<sup>290</sup>

As opposed to the chaos of the urban globalization, where the coming together of exiles only leads to more alienation, the borderland that defines Elisabeth is not a concrete place but a mental homeland, the utopian character of which is nourished by the protagonist’s

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 445.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 406.

elective state of exile. Her relationship with Franz Joseph Trotta, a true “extraterritorial” figure, who bears traits of both the Holocaust survivors Paul Celan and the British soldier Jack Hamesh<sup>291</sup> is the final determining factor that turns her own willful displacement from adventurous to empathetic. It is Trotta who leads her to fully claim Austrian responsibility for recent Nazi atrocities by not only exposing the Austrian fascists as the fiercer sadists (“[...]denen war die Gemeinheit, der Genuß an jeder erdenklichen Brutalität wirklich in die Visagen geschrieben, und so antworteten sie auch [...]”<sup>292</sup>) but also questioning the Austrian myth of victimhood which is willingly accepted by the French occupiers. The genuinely demonic Austrians do not fit the perpetrator profile:

Aber unsere Franzosen [...] schickten [...] nur die beiden [österreichischen] Verbrecher weiter, weil die harmloser schienen, aus einem Operettenland eben, das mit seinen Figuren ein Opfer geworden war. Ein Opfer, ja, aber ich wollte ihnen nicht erklären warum und weshalb, es war eben zu kompliziert zu sagen, auf welche Weise, mit welcher Geschichte dieser amputierte Staat ein Opfer geworden war.<sup>293</sup>

This passage suggests that Trotta, like Elizabeth’s father, believes that the complex historical developments leading to Austria’s alliance with Hitler Germany have to be traced back to the dissolution of the empire. Carefully read, this parallelism makes the argument for a deeper cause of fascism, not for a preferred Habsburg past. Ultimately, however, Elisabeth finds as little solace in an identity of “extraterritorialism” as Trotta does, who can never overcome the rupture between his Parisian exile and a curtailed Austrian past -- halfway through the narrative we learn that he has committed suicide.

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<sup>291</sup> On the parallels between Trotta and Celan see Weigel, *Hinterlassenschaften*, 397 ff. What Jack Hamesh and Trotta have in common is their work of interviewing former Nazis in Germany and Austria as soldiers of the Allied forces (Trotta for the French, Hamesh for the British army).

<sup>292</sup> Bachmann, “Drei Wege zum See,” 427.

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*, 427.

Elisabeth, on the other hand, is dispatched to Saigon upon her return to Paris, and the story ends with premonitions of violence: as she drifts off to sleep, she dreams of being shot and wounded.

If “Drei Wege zum See” constitutes the apogee of Habsburg imaginaries in Bachmann’s work, it is also the text that deconstructs the prevalent modes of Habsburg nostalgia the most. It does so by juxtaposing it to a new, but meaningless cosmopolitanism, reinforced through the stark divisions of the Cold War era. The new front lines thus created prevent a thorough post-fascist examination of guilt, repair and necessary transformation. Memory has become palimpsestic, the different historical layers of imperial, fascist and postwar Austria overlap and compete with each other, leading to the crisis of individual and national identity as outlined in this final short story. This picks up on earlier explorations of multi-layered identity in *Honditschkreuz* and the polemical reflections of postwar Austrian stereotypes in her *Radiofamilie* scripts. The narrative time of “Drei Wege zum See” is a time of failed hopes and revolutions, which trumps the utopian potential of a partially resurrected, but transposed Habsburg past – such as when Elisabeth selects a Habsburg multiethnic “wasteland” as her ideal home. More than anything, Bachmann uses those past topographies to negotiate spaces of loss or absence incurred by the more recent destructive history of German and Austrian fascism. “Heimat” becomes both a restorative and revolutionary concept as it loses its footing in a real physical environment -- while the Austrian bourgeois model of the European network of *belles lettres* as an intellectual home is subjected to critical examination, it is not discarded altogether. Bachmann plays on the importance of such a network, both past and present, by weaving references to Joseph Roth, Paul Celan, and

Jean Amery into “Drei Wege zum See,” and the utopian space of literature is evoked in her Frankfurt lectures. Not coincidentally, the “house of art” she constructs there is related in its unsteadiness and variety to the previously quoted “house of Austria:”

Die Kunst ist schon so viele Male umgezogen, vom Gotteshaus in das Haus der Ideale, vom house beautiful auf das bateau ivre, und dann in die Gossen, in die nackte Wirklichkeit, wie man sagte, und dann wieder in das Haus Traum und in die Tempel mit hängenden Gärten, und wieder fort in die pseudomystische Stickluft von Blut und Boden, und weiter in das Haus Humanität und in das Haus Politik. Als hätte sie nirgends Ruhe, als wäre kein Obdach ihr für immer zgedacht.

By citing the many temporary ‘homes’ of art i.e. the manifold ways in which it has been historically appropriated, Bachmann highlights both its transformative power and essential freedom – which can, as the reference to fascist “Blut und Boden”-Literatur demonstrates, also be subjected to abuse.



### **Peter Handke –Topographical Mysticism Against “Mitteleuropa”**

In one of her last interviews, Ingeborg Bachmann expressed her admiration for the recently published works of two young Austrian writers, in which she detected the influence of the language philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, whose writings Bachmann helped popularize in the 1950s. The two novels were Peter Handke's *Wunschloses Unglück* (1972) and Thomas Bernhard's *Verstörung* (1967). In 1973, one year after Bachmann's sudden death, Handke received the most prestigious literary award of the German-speaking world, the Büchner Prize, and dedicated his acceptance speech to the fellow Carinthian author.<sup>294</sup> Incidentally, this speech addresses the conflict between poetical and political language, an issue which would have very much resonated with Bachmann's poetics. Handke, who had already infamously rejected a prescriptive notion of “engaged writing” at the Gruppe 47 conference in Princeton in 1967, was asking what response poetic language could offer to “the political,” i.e. how it could respond to injustices and atrocities appearing in news headlines.<sup>295</sup> Above all, according to Handke, these new calamities are defined by their larger than life presence in the visual media, which leaves viewers with a feeling of complete helplessness. Handke opens his speech with a scene that recalls Bachmann's “Jugend in einer österreichischen Stadt,” where children are waiting in dark, bombed out houses during World War II: “Es ist nie mehr

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<sup>294</sup> Peter Handke, “Die Geborgenheit unter der Schädeldecke. Für Ingeborg Bachmann,” in *Als das Wünschen noch geholfen hat* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974), 71-80.

<sup>295</sup> The political background at the time can be identified as the Pinochet coup in Chile, as well as the Yom Kippur war in October of 1973.

Licht im Haus. Kein Glas im Fenster. Keine Tür in der Angel. Niemand rührt sich und niemand erhebt sich.<sup>296</sup> Analogous to this description, Handke writes:

Die Dunkelheit ist jetzt wieder die Finsternis aus der Kinderzeit. Man sitzt allein in einem Raum, man selber ist in Sicherheit, aber es fehlt noch der, den man am liebsten hat. Vor Angst werdet ihr müde und diese Müdigkeit ist der sprachlose, innerste Schmerz. Kein erleichtertes Aufspringen aus einem Gedankenspiel mehr, schwere und rundum erstarrte Gedankenlosigkeit.<sup>297</sup>

The atmosphere of paralysis and anxiety Handke conjures up in this opening paragraph is rooted in childhood memories from the Second World War (“die Finsternis aus der Kinderzeit”), which are triggered, however, by current political events. Born in 1942, Handke witnessed both the bombings of Berlin, where his mother had joined his stepfather, and his native Carinthia as a young child. While it is unlikely that all of these events were remembered consciously, their strategic re-invocation in the form of a modern experience of war is apparent.

The above quote also alludes to Handke’s debut novel *Die Hornissen* (1966), which he described as literary memory work.<sup>298</sup> When it was first published, critics received it as a piece of subjective, hermetical prose delighting in linguistic exercises, ignoring the historical context entirely. Due to its excessive attention to detail, structural repetition, fragmented “chapters” as well as exalted language, it was dismissed as an

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<sup>296</sup> Bachmann, *Werke* 4, 91.

<sup>297</sup> Handke, “Die Geborgenheit unter der Schädeldecke,” 71-72.

<sup>298</sup> Handke as quoted by Hans Höller: “Ein Mensch, der im Krieg noch Kind war, [...] liegt da und erinnert sich an die Begebenheiten, die damals im Krieg vor sich gegangen sind.” Hans Höller, *Peter Handke* (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 2007), 32.

ambitious, but too dense and self-reflective prose text.<sup>299</sup> The novel is set in a rural area of Austria (probably Carinthia) during the bombardments of 1944 and is preceded by the following preamble: “Du wirst gehen/ zurückkehren nicht sterben im Krieg.” Referring to the Latin oracle “Ibis, redibis, non morieris in bello,” which, depending on word order, can be read either as a prophecy for safe return or a guaranteed demise, Handke points out the precariousness of war.<sup>300</sup> The narrative begins with a similar scene of speechlessness as the Büchner prize talk: an adolescent boy, mud-caked and in torn clothes, sits in front of a fireplace, waiting for his combatant brother to return. In fact, his brother has just come home and is observing his sibling through the window, nearly not recognizing him as he stares into the fire in his mindless stupor. It turns out that his state has been caused by a recent attack: “Jetzt erinnerte ich mich, daß in der Nacht die Bomber geflogen waren.”<sup>301</sup> This section, which later turns out to be a dream sequence (the brother has actually died) is accompanied by a ‘title’ in the right margin of the book: “Das Einsetzen der Erinnerung,” This echoes Bachmann’s previously quoted identification of her first childhood memories with the arrival of Nazi troops in Klagenfurt: “[...]daß mit diesem Tag meine Erinnerung anfängt.”<sup>302</sup> Later, while he was traveling Serbia during the NATO attacks, Handke would reaffirm this claim, which is so

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<sup>299</sup> See for instance the Spiegel review by Jakov Lind, “Zarte Seelen, trockene Texte. Jakov Lind über Peter Handke: Die Hornissen,” *Der Spiegel*, July 11, 1966.

<sup>300</sup> See Malte Herwig, *Meister der Dämmerung: Peter Handke – eine Biographie* (Munich: Deutsche Verlagsanstalt, 2011), 7.

<sup>301</sup> Peter Handke, *Die Hornissen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1964), 12.

<sup>302</sup> Bachmann, *Gul*, 111.

central to the poetics of both authors: “[...]Sichwiederholen meiner ersten Kriegserinnerung, oder meiner ersten Erinnerung überhaupt?”<sup>303</sup>

It is the same state of paralysis, resulting from an endless circle of fear, helplessness, and unutterable pain that is conjured up in the speech again, though this time the adult author is of course not at the epicenter of destruction. What Handke describes is the vicarious witnessing of suffering and injustice through various media outlets, which, even though it transmits the illusion of participation and allegedly calls for engagement has the opposite effect. He refers specifically to the mind-numbing evening news in Austrian television: “Vor dem Fernseher saß ich und versuchte, etwas zu meinen, doch nur sprachlos einzelne Wörter stießen sich an der Schädeldecke.”<sup>304</sup> Forming an ethically appropriate opinion (“Meinung”) becomes impossible in spite of the intense emotional reaction that is initially triggered. This is because the images flooding the viewer have become decoupled from their intention of engagement, just as their corresponding key words have become so redundant that they do not even lend themselves to abstraction and language games anymore. Handke’s disparaging remark on the relief that comes with such abstraction (and the escape from ethical responsibility) is not only an allusion to his own rejection of prescriptive political writing and the engaged intellectual in Princeton, but also to the questions raised by Bachmann in her final published poem “Keine Delikatessen” (written around 1963): How can poetic writing

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<sup>303</sup> Peter Handke, *Unter Tränen fragend - nachträgliche Aufzeichnungen von zwei Jugoslawien-Durchquerungen im Krieg, März und April 1999* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 64. See also Florjan Lipuš, *Peter Handke. Unterwegs ins Neunte Land* (Vienna: Paul Zsolnay Verlag, 2008), 86 ff.

<sup>304</sup> Handke, “Die Geborgenheit unter der Schädeldecke,” 73.

continue in the face of human suffering? Are not stylistic considerations redundant or perverse when the writer tries to capture crude realities? To this, Bachmann responds:

Soll ich  
eine Metapher ausstaffieren  
mit einer Mandelblüte?  
Die Syntax kreuzigen  
auf einen Lichteffect?  
Wer wird sich den Schädel zerbrechen  
über so überflüssige Dinge-<sup>305</sup>

The writer's search for ornate metaphors ("Mandelblüte") and syntactic structures that will lead to enlightening results ("Lichteffect") is not only questioned but deemed futile, since these formal considerations cannot do justice to the visceral experiences (later in the poem) of "Hunger Schande Tränen und Finsternis." During his speech in Princeton, Handke had criticized the German literary obsession with the representation of a reality ("Wirklichkeit") in the early 1960s, which was quantifiable, allegedly objective, and simple, consequently ignoring subjective responses and details (Handke would remain a believer in the importance of marginal details) that go beyond this representation. Such a standardized approach, he argued,

übersieht, daß es in der Literatur nicht darum gehen kann, politisch bedeutungsgeladenen Dinge beim Namen zu nennen, sondern vielmehr von ihnen zu abstrahieren. Die Wörter Hitler, Auschwitz, Lübke, Berlin, Johnson, Napalmbomben sind mir schon zu bedeutungsgeladen, zu politisch, als daß ich sie, als Wörter, literarisch noch unbefangen gebrauchen könnte. [...] Es interessiert mich als Autor übrigens gar nicht, die Wirklichkeit zu zeigen oder zu bewältigen, sondern es geht mir darum, *meine* Wirklichkeit zu zeigen (wenn auch nicht zu bewältigen).<sup>306</sup>

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<sup>305</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Sämtliche Gedichte* (Munich: Piper, 1983), 82.

<sup>306</sup> Peter Handke, *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1972), 24- 25.

What Handke dismisses here is of course not a confrontation with the recent past in general, but rather the German assumption that a certain literary content will already bring about “Vergangenheitsbewältigung.”<sup>307</sup> This radical rejection of the political in literature has softened to some extent by 1973, when Handke emphasizes the power of the poetical voice to surpass the dominance and stock phrases of the political: “Ich bin überzeugt von der begriffsauflösenden und damit zukunftsächtigen Macht des poetischen Denkens.”<sup>308</sup> Handke maintains, that the aforementioned political key terms offer “Erleichterungen,” or ethical short-cuts for complex philosophical questions that coerce the writer into a downright ideological mind-frame (he calls this “Totalitarsanspruche der Begriffe,”<sup>309</sup> which is why they must be avoided. Bachmann, whose thinking, as has been pointed out, was deeply rooted in acute historical problems and was politically well informed, eschewed ‘confessional’ political writing on similar grounds, favoring representation over naming:

Ein Schriftsteller hat keine “Worte zu machen,” das heit, er hat keine Phrasen zu verwenden. Jedes Wort, ob es nun „Demokratie“ oder „Wirtschaft“ oder „kapitalistisch“ oder „sozialistisch“ heit, muss er in seinem Werk vermeiden, um darstellen zu konnen. [...] Denn fur mich verbietet sich das: Es ware das Leichteste, und das Leichteste muss man sich verbieten.<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>307</sup> Of course Theodor W. Adorno had already pointed out the inappropriateness of postwar discussions on German guilt and coping with the recent past in his seminal essay, „Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit?“. Theodor W. Adorno, “Was bedeutet: Aufarbeitung der Vergangenheit” [1959], in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 10.2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 555-572.

<sup>308</sup> Handke 1972, 76.

<sup>309</sup> *Ibid.*, 76-77.

<sup>310</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, *Gesprache und Interviews* (Munich: Piper, 1983), 91.

Here, Bachmann repeats a position, which she already touched upon in her Poetikdozentur lectures in Frankfurt. The poetical, of course, does not exist in a historical or moral vacuum, as the utilization of the *l'art pour art* approach by fascist and proto-fascist writers shows (Bachmann cites the Italian futurists and the problematic reactionary stance of Gottfried Benn<sup>311</sup>) and it is precisely this utilization, which makes the careful negotiation between dogma and ethics so necessary, albeit difficult. In his speech, Handke thus draws upon Bachmann's rejection of blunt engagement, and he does this by highlighting the significance of detail, which is not the same as writing realistically or in the documentary method.<sup>312</sup> Bachmann had remarked in several interviews that she researched the details informing her prose meticulously, such as street names or the specific streetcar line a character is taking; at the same time she vehemently opposed biographical interpretations of these real-life infusions in her work.<sup>313</sup> It is the same communicative power of marginal detail, which, as Handke maintains, is able to transcend overused key terms and inspire authentic empathy instead of vicarious emotions – particularly when confronted with iconic, overused images. At one point in his speech, Handke offers the photograph of a concentration camp inmate as an example:

[...] ich betrachtete das Photo neugierig, aber schon ohne Erinnerung; dieser photographierte Mensch hatte sich zu einem austauschbaren Symbol

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<sup>311</sup> Ingeborg Bachmann, "Über Gedichte," in *Werke 4*, (Munich: Piper, 1978), 202-204.

<sup>312</sup> See Peter Handke, Herbert Gamper, *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen: ein Gespräch* (Vienna: Amman Verlag, 1987), 45. In this interview, Handke emphasizes the significance of combining disruptive "jolts" and unifying "detailed structures" in his writing: "...diese Rucke, die man beim Übergang von einem Satz zu einem anderen hat, im Erarbeiten, im Bedenken, im Finden auch, nicht im Erfinden... diese Detailstrukturen: es sind ja nicht nur Details wie bei den Impressionisten, sondern es sind detaillierte *Strukturen*, verknüpft dann zu einem scheinhaften Ganzen."

<sup>313</sup> Bachmann, *Gul*, 52.

verflüchtigt. Plötzlich bemerkte ich seine Füße: Sie waren mit den Spitzen aneinandergestellt, wie manchmal bei Kindern, und jetzt wurde das Bild tief, und ich fühlte beim Anblick dieser Füße die schwere Müdigkeit, die eine Erscheinungsform der Angst ist. Ist das ein politisches Erlebnis?<sup>314</sup>

Handke states this during a time when the Holocaust debate had yet to fully emerge in Germany, and decades before Austria was to examine its Nazi affiliation in a more critical light.<sup>315</sup> Like Thomas Bernhard, Handke would ridicule the provincial and fascist mindset of his fellow Austrians rather than commemorate concrete historical events. This is because he associates history (just like the realist obsession and the documentary method) with a superimposed master narrative that eclipses all alternatives. Subjective authenticity and marginality remain two key demands of Handke's poetics in reflecting on Austria's fascist legacy, as well as his own family's conflicted past. Handke's fiction since the late 70s demonstrates the increasing importance he places on his mother's Slovenian heritage, and in which the latter is used to counter the Austrian and German Nazi past.

Handke's fascination with the marginal becomes more and more pronounced in his later work, encompassing his perception of space, identity and history. Furthermore, the affirmation of the marginal is understood as a destabilizing gesture towards the supremacy of the center. The Carinthian borderland of Handke's childhood is one of these marginal spaces where languages and cultural influences mingle, and where the in-between, the hybrid is the norm. The act of writing itself constitutes a transitory space, since it occurs on the borderline between intense affect and mystical experience, as laid

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>315</sup> In spite of the student protests of 1968, where students asked probing questions about their parents' involvement in Nazi crimes, a broad public debate on the Holocaust memory did not begin until the 1980s.



out in *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts*: “Das Schreiben muss sich ereignen am Rand der Verzweiflung und am Rand der Seligkeit (aber immer nur am Rand) und die Worte müssen an das Wunderbare grenzen.”<sup>316</sup> Already as a young writer, Handke traveled through the Socialist republic of Yugoslavia, which he would eventually elevate into the last European utopia, moving increasingly beyond political reality into a personal mythopoetic construct. It is therefore no accident that Handke’s turn to Slovenian themes, which occurs within the framework of the Socialist experiment of which Slovenia is part, coincides with what critics have observed as a mythical and classicist approach to literature. In many ways, his writings in the aftermath of the violent demise of the Socialist republic in the 1990s represent the climax of this long denouement towards the mythical, where story-telling becomes radically based on the subjective and marginal, but also on tribal, pre- and anti-historical rendering of events.<sup>317</sup>

Handke first explored Slovenia and Croatia as tourist destinations in his early 20s on the search for his Slovenian roots and composed first novel *Die Hornissen* on the island of Krk off the Adriatic shore. In 1987, he passed through Slovenia, Croatia and Macedonia again as part of a longer trip that took him around the world. His impressions from that second Yugoslav journey were later published as a collection of vignettes entitled *Noch einmal für Thukydides* (1990), which capture (among impressions from

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<sup>316</sup> Peter Handke, *Die Geschichte des Bleistifts* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1985).

<sup>317</sup> Jean Bertrand Miguoué identifies three paradigms that are crucial for Handke’s writings on Yugoslavia: subjectivity, marginality and counter-history (“Subjektzentriertheit, das Nebensächliche und die Gegengeschichte“). Jean Bertrand Miguoué, *Peter Handke und das zerfallende Jugoslawien* (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2012), 43.

other countries) idyllic moments of everyday life in the Yugoslav republics.<sup>318</sup> Defined by concreteness (Handke actually refers to “Gegenständlichkeit,“), simplicity, and the spirit of community, it is first Yugoslav Slovenia that is posited as a counter-space to the materialistic, alienated, and colonizing West, in particular Austria. Beginning with his 1986 novel *Die Wiederholung*, Slovenia is established as the author’s true spiritual home, since it unites a heightened sense of authenticity (“Zu Hause in Slowenien, Jugoslawien? In der Wirklichkeit.<sup>319</sup>”) with a fairytale-like, mystical quality (“etwas Drittes, oder »Neuntes«, Unbenennbares, dafür aber Märchenwirkliches”).<sup>320</sup> It was not until the Slovenian secession in 1991 and the beginning of the Yugoslav civil wars that his attention shifted from a Slovenian space of childhood and family history, to Serbia as the last remnant of this treasured utopia, in which the Serbian people became the inheritors and righteous defenders of the Yugoslav idea.<sup>321</sup> Later, this already essentialist tendency would extend to the Slavic, Balkan space in general. The nostalgic celebration of Slovenia’s Habsburg past and Socialist present turns to lament in his 1991 essay *Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land. Erinnerung an eine Wirklichkeit, die vergangen ist*, in which he harshly criticizes Slovenian independence and attributes it to the influence of Western decadence. Moreover, he stages it as the contest between two

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<sup>318</sup> Peter Handke, *Noch einmal für Thukydides* (Vienna: Residenz Verlag, 1995). Handke’s titles already point to the lyrical tone of the vignettes: “Die Tauben von Pazin,” “Der Schuhputzer von Split,” or “Die Kopfbedeckungen in Skopje.” Usually, one motif (doves nesting in a train station, a lone shoe-shiner, the variety of hats observed during a walk) is used to convey some essential quality of the location: be it perseverance, diligence or ethnic diversity. The last essay seems particularly significant in the context of the Yugoslav wars, since it was originally entitled “Noch einmal für Jugoslawien” and only added to the second edition of *Thukydides* in 1995.

<sup>319</sup> Peter Handke, *Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land* (Klagenfurt: Wieser Verlag, 1991).

<sup>320</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

collective utopian spaces: that of multiethnic Socialist Yugoslavia, and of a westernized Central Europe. In this essay of farewell, he accuses the “Gespenstergerede von Mitteleuropa“ of having furthered infantile dreams of national sovereignty in the Slovenian people and brought about the moral corruption of Slovenia. Handke attacked “Mitteleuropa” as a reactionary, even demagogic concept that has turned the focus from culture to politics:

In den vergangenen Jahren jedoch, sooft ich nach Slowenien kam, wurde dort, zuletzt mehr und mehr, eine neue Geschichte verbreitet. Neu? Es war die altväterische, aber mit der Zeit neu gewendete Sage von »Mitteleuropa«. Und diese, anders als die der schweigsamen [Partisanen-]Veteranen, hatte statt der sporadischen Erzähler gruppenweise Sprecher, mehr oder weniger lautstarke. Oder so: Auch hier, zur Geschichte Mitteleuropa, hatte es zunächst die Erzähler gegeben, und deren Stelle nahmen inzwischen fast ausschließlich die Sprecher ein; oder: die ursprünglichen Erzähler selber, manchmal meine Freunde, hatten, zur Unkenntlichkeit verändert, die Rollen von Sprechern angenommen.<sup>322</sup>

For Handke, this “Mitteleuropa” does not carry the utopian potency that György Konrad had invoked so enthusiastically in his essay “Does the Dream of Central Europe Still Exist?,” where it was clearly framed as a vision, as well as an experience beyond politics.<sup>323</sup> Instead, he considers it a symptom for the politicization and commodification that stripped a region that has been crucial for the formation of his literary and private identity of its original, poetical aura. It disowned him of a cause that Handke had essentially considered his own: “[...] eine der wenigen Sachen, welche bei mir

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<sup>322</sup> Handke, *Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land*, 22.

<sup>323</sup> György Konrad, “Does the Dream of Central Europe Still Exist?,” 1. Konrad highlights the utopian, idealist, romantic vision of Central Europe as a community of arts and intellectual freedom.

zusammengehören mit dem Beiwort »mein«; Sache nicht meines Besitzes, sondern meines Lebens.»<sup>324</sup>

As poets turned into politicians, narrators (“Erzähler“) to speakers (“Sprecher“), the dream of the “Ninth Land,” as Handke fondly called Slovenia, vanished, eclipsed by the dream of Central Europe. This specific term was coined through a Slovenian folk epos written by Josip Stritar in 1878, which envisioned *The Ninth Land* as an egalitarian island utopia, similar to the one depicted in Thomas More’s *Utopia*. Ironically, this canonical 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian text was inspired by anti-Habsburg sentiments, which bred the very same nationalist tendencies that Handke found so disenchanting.<sup>325</sup>

However, Handke’s profound skepticism towards any collective idea of Europe had started to build up long before the personal disillusionment with his Slovenian/Yugoslav utopia.<sup>326</sup> When asked about his position on the *Mitteleuropa* debate in 1987, Handke stated infamously that he associated the term merely with “a meteorological phenomenon,”<sup>327</sup> a point he had argued in a similarly polemical way a year before, when he claimed that already the different weather conditions between the postulated *Mitteleuropa* regions prevented any type of unified experience, let alone

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<sup>324</sup> Handke, *Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land*, 7.

<sup>325</sup> See Lipuš, *Unterwegs ins Neunte Land*, 239-240.

<sup>326</sup> This viewpoint continues until the more recent present. See Anne Kraume, “Einleitung,” in *Das Europa der Literatur. Schriftsteller blicken auf den Kontinent 1815-1945* (Berlin, New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 1. Handke is quoted as commenting on Europe as a fairytale of the past: “Europa? –Es war einmal.”

<sup>327</sup> Interview with Jože Horvat in Salzburg, 1987: Jože Horvat and Peter Handke, *Noch einmal vom Neunten Land. Peter Handke im Gespräch mit Jože Horvat* (Klagenfurt: Wieser Verlag, 1993), 63.

cultural cohesion.<sup>328</sup> Even more importantly, he rejected its political implications. To him, *Mitteleuropa* was a revisionist project, the ghost of old Habsburg (“dieser Gedanke, [...] der jetzt herumgeistert oder spukt oder auch wirksam ist in vielen Köpfen”<sup>329</sup>) that was being invoked for the purpose of postwar Austrian economic expansionism. Accordingly, he distrusted organizations such as the 1978 founded Alpe-Adria network, suspecting them of merely acting on behalf of Austrian self-interest. The organization, which is based in Klagenfurt, established a cultural, political and economical co-operation between Austrian, Italian, Croatian, Slovenian and Hungarian border districts and conceives of itself as a vehicle for building bridges across nations.<sup>330</sup> In contrast to that, Handke criticizes the lack of equality between the various partners:

Die Österreicher gebrauchen die Alpe-Adria für die Verhüllung ihrer nationalistischen Mentalität, so daß meiner Meinung nach diese Gemeinschaft nicht das ist, was sie in einem wirklichen Regionalismus sein sollte, wo nämlich die Regionen völlig selbstständig bleiben, stolz auf sich, und untereinander gleichberechtigt zusammenarbeiten sollten. [...] Das Streben nach Mitteleuropa scheint mir überhaupt unmöglich, denn in der Vergangenheit ist hier mit seinen Völkern, die ja überwiegend in einem gemeinsamen Staat lebten, so viel Schlimmes passiert, daß sie nicht gemeinsam sein können. Dieses Gemeinsame ist oberflächlich, und in Wirklichkeit unterscheiden sich diese Völker so sehr voneinander, daß zwischen ihnen unter der Oberfläche überhaupt keine

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<sup>328</sup> “Aber meine Sache ist es nicht. Allein schon [...] das verschiedene Wetter, zum Beispiel im Karsthochland oberhalb von Triest über den Alpen, im Blick nach Norden, die mitteleuropäische Wolkenbank so stehen zu sehen und danach den Meereswind zu spüren; da sieht man schon im Wetter, im Meteorologischen, eine Grenze.” In *Peter Handke. Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenräumen. Ein Gespräch, geführt von Herbert Gamper* (Zürich: Ammann Verlag, 1987), 153-154.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>330</sup> The organization’s objectives, which have acquired an even larger dimension since the founding and eastward expansion of the European Community, are stated on its official website. Next to the professed “Brückenfunktion,” its members fulfill „eine wichtige Rolle im europäischen Integrationsprozess,” setting an example for „die Förderung der Freundschaft und der vielfältigen Zusammenarbeit zwischen den verschiedenen Völkern.” <http://www.alpeadria.org/>. “Arbeitsgemeinschaft Alpen-Adria.” Accessed on July 25, 2012.

Verbindungen bestehen. Zuerst müßten sie sich also selbst erkennen und darüber diskutieren – diese Diskussion gibt es aber z.B. in Österreich nicht.

Handke repeats a common argument against “Mitteleuropa” – the conflicted history of the region, of which the imbalance between Austrian center and the Slavic margins during Habsburg rule has been only one of the many divisive elements. Interestingly enough, however, Handke had closely followed and participated in the “Mitteleuropa” debate during the early 1980s. Among other locations, “Mitteleuropa” was passionately discussed at the annual literary convention in Vilenica, Slovenia, which hosted a number of dissident authors from the Soviet bloc, as well as Yugoslav, Austrian and German writers between 1986 and 1990.<sup>331</sup> During this event, the annual Vilenica prize was awarded as well, the awardee being chosen by the Slovenian writer’s association – quite pointedly, Handke received it in 1987 for *Die Wiederholung*. Apparently the jury, which was becoming more and more fond of “Mitteleuropa” as a new identity, saw their own vision for a new Europe affirmed in Handke’s novel, in which a Carinthian of Slovene descent travels to the land of his ancestors in search for his lost older brother, an agriculturist turned Partisan fighter. The award committee emphasized the author’s influence on the development of modern European literature and his promotion of literary communication across borders, as well as the “openness,” “tolerance,” and “innovative impulses” displayed in his work, which “extend beyond the immediate Central European

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<sup>331</sup> See <http://www.vilenica.si/ENG/archive.html>. Accessed on December 12, 2012. All the main contributors to the debate have come to Vilenica in that period: In 1988, Czeslaw Milosz gave the main talk; Aleksandar Tišma and Christoph Ransmayr were among the attendees. In 1989, György Konrád gave the keynote address entitled “From the Center,” and Dubravka Ugrešić and Danilo Kiš were attending.

space” [my translation].<sup>332</sup> What they failed to notice was that the regional always appeared more appealing than the national or transnational to Handke, and is freed from its socio-political corset to be supplemented by that which seems to transcend history: myth, the archaic, and folklore. In fact, he has expressed his frustration about the impossibility to divest a space, when writing about it, completely from its history, a ‘purification’ that he strives to achieve in his literary work:

Für mich sind die Orte ja die Räume, die Begrenzungen, die Erlebnisse hervorbringen. Mein Ausgangspunkt ist ja nie eine Geschichte oder ein Ereignis, ein Vorfall, sondern immer ein Ort. Ich möchte den Ort nicht beschreiben, sondern erzählen.<sup>333</sup>

On the formal level, Handke has extended his poetical need for divestment of pre-defined meaning and the possibility of creative redemption to the German language. Handke’s return to an ornate style of writing, as it can be traced back to his novel *Langsame Heimkehr* (1979) seeks to redeem a diction tainted by the Hitler period: “jegliches deutsche Wort [ist] noch immer verwendbar [...], sogar jenes »Heil«, aber nur, wenn ihm der Dichter eine besondere Bedeutungswandlung oder Richtungsänderung ermöglicht und es damit erlöst.”<sup>334</sup> Considering his requirements for an ahistorical utopia, which is found in and through language, it is not surprising that Handke’s narratives appear to support the binary opposition between memory and history as set up by Pierre Nora, as

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<sup>332</sup> See Florjan Lipuš’s analysis of Handke’s winning the prize in Lipuš, *Unterwegs ins Neunte Land*, 251.

<sup>333</sup> Handke/Gamper, *Aber ich lebe nur von den Zwischenäumen*, 19. See also the following, even more explicit quote which contrasts subjective experience with the imposed perception of history and politics: “Sie wollen nur das Ich, das wahrnehmende, betrachtende, sich erinnernde, entwerfende Ich und die Landschaft, und die Historie [...] ist mir halt dazwischen gekommen...”

<sup>334</sup> Handke/Horvat, *Noch einmal vom Neunten Land*, 17.

they are constructed through the lens of individual and collective memory.<sup>335</sup> I believe that Handke's fiction strives to recreate the *millieux de memoire* that Nora considers irrevocably lost to the modern world (Nora insists that we create *lieux de memoire* because the original *millieux* of tribal story telling are lost). The role of the author as language prophet (or *poeta vates*) is crucial in this, since the creation of a personal mythical space is supported by a narrative style that is ornate, ceremonial, archaic and thus evocative of myth.<sup>336</sup> For the purpose of this chapter, I will examine excerpts from the novel *Die Wiederholung*, (1986), where he explores his Slovenian family roots, reflecting on postwar questions of collective loss, transnational belonging and the possibility of untainted living, as well as *Die morawische Nacht* (2008), a fictional sequel on his highly controversial Yugoslav journals, which marks the apogee of his Yugoslav or Balkan utopianism. The latter novel can be read as a revised, more sober version of the former, since it demonstrates both the consistent and dynamic elements of Handke's literary myth-making. I will only refer to Handke's Yugoslav travelogues sporadically to expand on major themes in those two novels; there is neither the need nor space here to offer an extensive analysis. What is important, however, is that Handke fashions his neomythical (post)Yugoslav spaces as counter-images to the threat of "Mitteleuropa."

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<sup>335</sup> See Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History. *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 69, Spring (1989): 8. "Memory is life, borne by living societies founded in its name. It remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting [...] History, on the other hand, is the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer."

<sup>336</sup> Herwig Gottwald, "Von Namen, Augenblicksgöttern und Wiederholungen. Handkes Umgang mit dem Mythischen." In: *Poesie der Ränder*, ed. Klaus Amann, Fabjan Hafner, and Karl Wagner (Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2006), 138.



In *Die Wiederholung*, travelogue meets detective story: After completing his high school exams in Klagenfurt, protagonist Filip Kobal embarks on a trip to Slovenia to search for traces of his older brother Gregor, who went missing as a soldier in the Second World War. The narrative can only find structure through the process of memory – only by revisiting the trip in his mind, can the now adult Filip organize what had seemed a “confused epic” (“ein wirres Epos,”<sup>337</sup>) to the wandering adolescent. Memory is emphasized as an act of repetition, of active re-positioning, and as such it shows up most prominently in the title of the novel, but this ‘finding again’ also fictionalizes and thus expands that which has been remembered:<sup>338</sup>

[...] Was gewesen war, zeigte, indem es wiederkehrte, seinen Platz. [...] und deshalb ist mir die Erinnerung kein beliebiges Zurückdenken, sondern ein Am-Werk-Sein, und das Werk der Erinnerung schreibt dem Erlebten seinen Platz zu, in der es am Leben erhaltenden Folge, der Erzählung, die immer wieder übergehen kann ins offene Erzählen, ins größere Leben, in die Erfindung.<sup>339</sup>

Filip’s mission to recover the memory of his brother, of whom he has no recollection, is also the exploration of his own identity. Ironically, the process of “remembering” historical and personal events involves the forgetting of his old self as the Carinthian schoolboy and outsider, a position which has become even more pronounced since the publication of his first short story in a local newspaper and the sudden exposure it brings for the shy adolescent. Filip wants to be forgotten in his newly revealed aspirations as a writer, and he seeks this oblivion in the Slovenian landscape: “Zog es mich nicht gleich nach meiner Ankunft in der Woche in zu einem Weiler, der in der Karte eingezeichnet

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<sup>337</sup> Peter Handke, *Die Wiederholung* (Salzburg: Residenz Verlag, 2005), 71.

<sup>338</sup> See also Bastian Strinz, “Raum- und Zeitkonstruktion bei Peter Handke in *Die Wiederholung* und *Versuch über die Jukebox*,” *Mauerschau* (1) (2010): 171-187.

<sup>339</sup> Handke, *Wiederholung*, 71.

war als *Pozabljeno*, was etwa »das Vergessene« oder die »Vergessenheit « hieß?»<sup>340</sup> The lost brother Gregor, who bears the same name as a famous Slovenian rebel several hundred years before him, is elevated into a figure of mythical proportions, a symbol for the loss of the Slovenian heritage, but also that of minorities, misfits, hybrid existences in general. The novel begins with an ambiguous positioning of time and place, which reinforces Nora's claim of memory as a "perpetually actual phenomenon."<sup>341</sup> Writing twenty-five years after he returned from his journey, now a middle-aged man, the narrator posits: "Ein Vierteljahrhundert oder ein Tag ist vergangen, seit ich, auf der Spur meines verschollenen Bruders, in Jesenice ankam."<sup>342</sup> Just as the Slovenian town of Jesenice of twenty-five years ago has become a virtual home for the protagonist, the reader is repeatedly confronted with the parallel existence of different time planes. The layering of space-time (Socialist present 1960, Habsburg legacy pre 1918 and the Austrian experience 1985) is recurrent in the narrative, such as when Filip first crosses the border into Slovenia. He admires Yugoslavia's high educational standards and commitment towards progress ("sogenannt fortschrittlich,"<sup>343</sup>), which was part of the federal republics motto in the economic expansion of the late 1950s and 60s, but also perceives the imperial past of the same region ("einst Teil eines Großreichs."<sup>344</sup>) which

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>341</sup> Nora, "Between Memory and History," 8.

<sup>342</sup> Handke, *Wiederholung*, 7.

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 8.

still displayed a double identity during Filip's childhood: "[...]in den Schulkarten, ...[hie] Jesenice in Klammern noch altsterreichisch Abling."<sup>345</sup>

Filip Kobal is not only the mediator between different times and spaces, but he appears to embody this permanent bi-location himself, as the first encounter with the Yugoslav border police reveals: "[...] Kobal sei doch ein slawischer Name, »kobal« heie der Raum zwischen den gegrtschten Beinen, der »Schritt«; und so auch Mensch der mit gespreizten Beinen dastehe."<sup>346</sup> Inherent in the Kobal family name is the physical act of splitting, of reaching out into different directions, and thereby creating a space of in-between with the own body. Filip's father, as we learn later, once proposed a different interpretation during a mountain hike near the Slovenian border:

Auf der Kammlinie, hinter der Jugoslawien anfing, stellte sich der Vater einmal gegrtscht auf, den einen Fu hier, den anderen dort, und hielt mir eine seiner kurzen Reden: »Sieh her, was unser Name bedeutet: nicht der Breitbeinige, sondern die Grenznatur. Dein Bruder der Mittemensch – und wir die zwei Grenznaturen. Ein Kobal, das ist sowohl der, der auf allen vieren kriecht als auch der leichtfuige Kletterer. Eine Grenznatur, das ist eine Randexistenz, doch keine Randfigur!«<sup>347</sup>

An existence at the margin and unclear belonging are reflected in Filip's childhood in provincial Carinthia, which is outlined at the beginning of the book. It is not just life in the village, but also deep cracks in the family fabric, which confuse Filip's sense of belonging. The struggles of each family member contribute to an overall identity of fragmentation and restlessness. The mother, although of German descent, appropriates her husband's Slovenian heritage; the father, in spite of being a skillful farmer and

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 164.

handyman, is a rootless character who never learns how to settle down (“der des Wohnens nicht fähige Vater,”<sup>348</sup>); and the sister is debilitated by an unspecified mental condition. It appears that the family’s development came to a halt with the loss of Gregor, who embodied the promise for a better future. The Kobal family’s self-identification as outsiders is linked to their rebel lineage – exiled from Slovenia after the execution of the peasant leader Gregor Kobal, they never shed their consciousness as outcasts, thereby siding with those vanquished by history:

Was von dieser Geschichte für meinen Vater zählte, das war freilich nicht das Aufrührer- und Anführertum, sondern die Hinrichtung und die Vertreibung. Wir waren seitdem eine Sippe von Knechten geworden, von Wanderarbeitern, die nirgends ihren Wohnsitz hatten [...] Dabei war es keineswegs so, daß mein Vater die Verdammung [...] nur ergeben hinnahm; er betrachtete sie als empörend. [...] Der Vater war mit allen Kräften, besonders mit seiner Zähigkeit, auf Erlösung für sich und die Seinen aus [...] war dabei aber, so als sei das Teil einer solchen Sehnsucht, ohne Hoffnung, ohne Traum, ohne Vorschlag an uns [...]. Dafür machte er die beiden Weltkriege verantwortlich, deren ersten er fast ausschließlich an unserem legendären Heimatfluß, dem Isonzo, durchstanden, und deren zweiten er als Vater eines Fahnenflüchtigen im Verbannungsort Rinkenbergr durchwartet hatte.<sup>349</sup>

Rather than a passive acceptance of victim mentality, the father defiantly appropriates forced exile and oppression as a way of life. While he does not abandon the struggle for redemption from this state, he has no notion of what it might look like – his experience of unprecedented historical disaster as embodied in the First and Second World Wars has extinguished his capacity for utopian vision. Filip’s mother, on the other hand, in a Christian cyclical understanding of justice, maintains that the fall from grace has to be followed by eventual elevation, and thus reads the expulsion of her husband’s family as a prophecy of return (“Die Ur-Kunde von Ziel und Anspruch: eine Verheißung”). The

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 49-51.

spiritual and physical repatriation, however, is not to be expected from outside forces, but has to be claimed by the family itself: “Auf, hin, nach Südwesten, zur Landnahme, wie immer die auch aussehe!”<sup>350</sup>. By returning to the destined family home, Filip is therefore trying to reconcile his mother’s utopian dream with his father’s memory of expulsion. In accordance to his early dismissal of mimetic realism in literature, Handke introduces a heightened, almost mystical sense of “Wirklichkeit” in *Die Wiederholung* – where history enters the narrative, it is always balanced by myth. By borrowing from the literary traditions of myth and epic, Handke strives to bring back an originary essence of humanity, guided by a profound belief in the transgressive, utopian power of poetic experience. The world created through writing is not a mimetic one, but rather a counter-version which draws in a collective of hopeful utopianists: “[...] daß das, was ich tue, eine *Gegenwelt* aufstellt, die vorhanden ist, die nicht erfunden ist, den Anspruch hab ich schon, daß sozusagen die Leute, die das aufnehmen, begeistert sind, endlich in ihre Welt, also in unsere Welt überlaufen [zu können].”<sup>351</sup> Myth is conceived in its traditional function of creating order and meaning within the framework of a metaphysical, religious tale. The fantastic tale, or myth, opposes the rational historiographic tale, *logos*.<sup>352</sup> Filip’s journey, with its ceremonious, elated language that elevates Slovenia into a promised land, can be read both as a pilgrimage and an odyssey.<sup>353</sup>

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<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>351</sup> Handke/ Gamper, *Aber ich lebe ja nur von den Zwischenräumen*, 119.

<sup>352</sup> Laurence Coupe, *Myth. The New Critical Idiom* (London, New York: Routledge, 1997), 9-11.

<sup>353</sup> See Wolfgang Müller-Funk, “Vom Habsburgischen zum jugoslawischen Mythos. Peter Handkes *Die Wiederholung* (1986) – und jene Volten, die sich daran anschließen sollten,” in *Komplex Österreich. Fragmente zu einer Geschichte der österreichischen Literatur* (Vienna: Sonderzahl, 2009), 341-354.

Since a utopian vision always emerges out of dissatisfaction with the current environment, it necessarily presupposes an antipode. For Filip, this is represented by rural Austria. While Austria appears as an uncanny home (“ortlos, frostig, unfreundschaftlich, menschenfresserisch”<sup>354</sup>), characterized by social alienation, backwardness and barely suppressed aggression, Socialist Yugoslavia (contrary to western narratives) is presented as the land of experience, of authenticity (“Gesichter [...] ohne Masken”<sup>355</sup>), and freedom, which magically transforms Filip’s perception of time and space. Instead of representing grey anonymity, the land and its inhabitants are elevated into a Socialist savage nobility. Already on the day of his arrival, Slovenia is placed in the lineage of numerous ancient civilizations – the Biblical Jews, the Mayans, and the pre-modern Chinese: “...das PETROL-Schild einer Tankstelle [...] durch das Geäst eines Baumes gesehen [erinnerte] an ein, nur ein im Traum erlebtes, China [...],” “eine gleichermaßen fremdartige Sinaiwüste öffnete sich hinter den Hochhausblöcken;” “im Vorbeifahren [sprang mir] das Fragment einer hebräischen Schriftrolle [...] in die Augen.”<sup>356</sup> And just as Bachmann had taken up Shakespeare to poetically transfer Bohemia to the seaside in her famous poem “Böhmen liegt am Meer,” Handke transplants the Slovenian borderland in the mind of his young protagonist to the shores of the Atlantic: “[da] ergriff mich die Vorstellung, hinter den Gleisen stiegen gleich die Dünen des Atlantik an.”<sup>357</sup> Later on, the terrace-like structures that had been built in the Slovenian Karst region as grazing grounds for cattle

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<sup>354</sup> Handke, *Wiederholung*, 86.

<sup>355</sup> Handke, *Wiederholung*, 93.

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

(“Viehsteige”) are associated with the Mayans again, when Filip recalls his former teacher’s claim that the Slovenian Karst region geographically resembles the elevated plain in Yucatan, and titles them “Viehsteigpyramiden.”<sup>358</sup> In the most glaring contraposition of poetry and politics, Handke imagines this mythical realm as immune to Cold War nuclear threat: “[...] kein Geschichts-Drama will ich mehr gelten lassen als das von den Dingen und Wörtern der lieben Welt – dem Dasein – und die Bombe, welche die Viehsteig-Pyramide bedroht, soll dort weich auftreffen in Gestalt jenes Worts für eine »längliche Birne«.”<sup>359</sup> The power of poetic language creates a sense of immediacy that defeats the “historical drama,” and the bomb dropped on this utopian realm is transformed by the Slovenian word for a certain type of pear. The poetic word, as affirmed repeatedly by Handke, has redeeming quality, and the ability to recreate reality.

In *Die Wiederholung*, reality needs to be expanded by non-cognitive states of mind like dreams and mystical visions. When Filip crosses the border into the land of his ancestors, he is overcome by a daydream while sitting in a pub at the Jesenice train station (“leichter, lichter, scharfer Traum,”<sup>360</sup>), through which he perceives himself as being absorbed into the blurry, friendly mass of Slovenian strangers around him. This collective Slovenian consciousness appears as both transgenerational and mystical: “[...] und ich gehörte mit meinem Spiegelbild zu diesem Volk, dass ich mir auf einer unablässigen, friedfertigen,

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<sup>358</sup> Ibid., 148-150; 153.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 13.

abenteuerlichen, gelassenen Wanderung durch eine Nacht vorstellte, wo auch die Schläfer, die Kranken, die Sterbenden, ja sogar die Gestorbenen mitgenommen wurden.”<sup>361</sup>

What is crucial for Handke’s narrative, however, and what undermines an all too quick interpretation of him as an ahistorical, reactionary writer, is the regularity with which such dreams and utopian projections are taken back and unsettled. Filip’s phantasy of collective unity is tempered by the intrusion of concrete social reality: “Ich richtete mich auf und wollte diesen Traum wahrhaben. Es störte ihn dann nur das überlebensgroße Portrait des Staatspräsidenten, das genau in der Raummitte, über der Theke hing.”<sup>362</sup> Similarly, his perception of Slovenia as the true land of liberty is taken back almost immediately: “Das es eine Täuschung war, das wusste ich schon damals.”<sup>363</sup> But while the narrator possesses the ability to distinguish between the factual and the fictional, he embraces the imaginative perception as a heightened, dynamic and thus preferred one: “Aber so eine Art von Wissen wollte ich nicht, oder richtiger: Ich wollte es loswerden, und solch einen Willen erkannte ich als mein Lebensgefühl; der Antrieb, den ich so aus der Täuschung erhielt ist jedenfalls bis heute nicht vergangen.” Employing “delusion” as a deliberate element, along with the insertion of fragmented and stripped-down mythical motifs is part of Handke’s ambivalent take on myth. While mythical themes like the Homeric journey home, the biblical promised land and its chosen people, as well the more general archetypes of the hero, the saintly king, or the youngest brother as redeemer of the family (Filip can be compared to the biblical Joseph) seem to provide

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<sup>361</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid..

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 84.



a stable referential frame, their repeated disruption shows that they cannot be fully realized in an anti-mythical postwar present.<sup>364</sup> What remains is the narration for narration's sake, since redemption or real home-coming is not possible, as Filip acknowledges towards the end of the novel: "Ich sah mich an einem Ziel. Nicht den Bruder zu finden hatte ich doch im Sinn gehabt, sondern von ihm zu erzählen."<sup>365</sup>

The Habsburg period does not figure as one myth amongst many, but rather figures as a bridge between modern Austria and Socialist Slovenia throughout the novel. Shortly before *Die Wiederholung* was published, Handke had insisted on the utopian usefulness of the imperial legacy ("Reichsgedanke"), which he wished to decouple from any particular historical or political agenda.<sup>366</sup> When Filip discovers that the architectural layering in the buildings of Jesenice unites different time periods in one edifices, this gives them almost testimonial quality: "Die Gebäude vor meinen Augen wiesen, [...] vergleichbar einem Ablagerungsgestein, auf die Schichten der Bauvergangenheit, von den Sockeln des österreichischen Kaisertums über die Erkervorsprünge des südslawischen Königreichs bis hinauf in die glatten, unverzierten Obergeschoße der gegenwärtigen »Volksrepublik Slowenien«, samt den Mündungslöchern für die

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<sup>364</sup> Herwig Gottwald calls these echoes "Schwundstufen des Mythos" or "mythosanalogue Strukturen". They consider myth more as an aesthetic category rather than teleological framework. Gottwald, "Von Namen, Augenblicksgöttern und Wiederholungen. Handkes Umgang mit dem Mythischen." In: Amman, *Poesie der Ränder*, 135-154.

<sup>365</sup> Handke, *Wiederholung*, 221.

<sup>366</sup> Handke/Gamper, *Aber ich lebe ja nur von den Zwischenräumen*, 151-152: "Dieser Gedanke an das Reich, das ist schon etwas, was im Lauf der Zeit für mich immer wieder fruchtbar geworden ist Es taucht ja nur [kurz auf] wie Atlantis, bestimmt aber doch die Weiterbewegung [...] Man muss ja dazu nicht Kaiserreich sagen."

Fahnenstangen unten am Dachfenster.<sup>367</sup> It is through the contrast between the different layers of the ‘now’ and ‘then’ that Filip learns to position himself, and that he is in fact able to overcome the separation of time. The mind-altering immersion in this space sparks Filip’s courage to invoke the ghost of the past, vicariously represented by his brother Gregor, who appears as an archetypal, messianic figure:

In der Betrachtung einer dieser Fassaden wollte ich auf einmal, [...] der verschollene Bruder würde die halbverfallene, mit undurchsichtigem, geriffeltem Glas verkleidete Erkertür aufstoßen und sich zeigen. Ich dachte sogar wörtlich: »Vorfahr, zeig dich!« [...] Für einen Zeitsprung war ich, im Anrufenkönnen, meines Bruders innegeworden, lebensgroß (wie ich ihn nie gekannt hatte), breitschultrig, braunhäutig, mit dem dichten, gelockten Haar und der mächtigen Stirn [...]. Ein Schauer überlief mich, so als sähe ich da meinen König vor mir [...].<sup>368</sup>

The order of lineages is subverted when Gregor assumes the role of the utopian ruler and ancestor (“Vorfahr”). The poetic liberty with which Handke reshuffles relationships and allegiances is crucial here – later on in the narrative, Filip continues to refer to his brother as an ancestor by choice (“Wahl-Ahn”<sup>369</sup>). Since his imagination is not distracted by concrete, tactile memories of his brother, he is able to transform him into a mythical character in his fiction. The brother is also depicted as a political martyr, who switched over to the Slovenian side during the war, even though he was conscripted by fascist Greater Germany. The two books that Filip brings with him to Slovenia figure as reliquia for the saintly brother and the sacrifice he committed on behalf of his family’s heritage: one is Gregor’s notebook from agricultural school, written partly in Slovenian, partly in German, the other a 19<sup>th</sup> century Slovenian dictionary. Due to Filip’s unfamiliarity with

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid., 89-90.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 133.

Slovenian, the sound of the foreign words takes on evocative power when he reads them aloud, turning the dictionary into a collection of “Ein-*Wort*-Märchen, mit der Kraft von Weltbildern.”<sup>370</sup> The dictionary was issued during the rise of Slovenian nationalism, which sought linguistic and territorial sovereignty from Austria-Hungary, where the minor Slavic languages, along with their speakers, were put at a disadvantage.<sup>371</sup> Handke also refers to this linguistic oppression in *Abschied des Träumers vom Neunten Land*, when he argues that only the kingdom of Yugoslavia allowed the South Slavs to shake off their identities as slave subjects: “[...] erstmals in einem eigenen Reich, wo die einzelnen Länder keine schattenhaften Kolonien mehr, die einzelnen Sprachen kein Sklavengemunkel mehr zu sein bräuchten.”<sup>372</sup> The contrast between Filip’s postwar present and the late 19th century of this compendium of compressed fairytales, however, also turns the dictionary into a memory book whose entries point to that which is no more, thereby drawing up a cartography of loss:

Aber galt der Plan überhaupt noch? War das Wort für das wechselseitige Klopfen zweier Dreschflegel nicht hinfällig, weil die entsprechenden Geräte schon seit langem in Museen standen? War das Überdauernde nicht eher das Wort für den »Schall eines fallenden Körpers«? War der Ausdruck, der im vergangenen Jahrhundert noch rein »die Auswanderung« bezeichnet hatte, nicht um seine Unschuld gekommen, indem die Ereignisse des letzten Weltkriegs ihn umdeuteten zu der erzwungenen »Aussiedlung«? Fehlten in dem alten Buch nicht die Widerstandskämpfer, die Partisanen, für welche die »Partisane«, eine ausgediente Spießwaffe, kein Ersatz war? Ja, gab es nicht schon zur Zeit der Sammlung auffallend viele Bezeichnungen für Stätten, wo einmal etwas gewesen und jetzt nichts mehr war, das Brachland, »wo früher Gerste wuchs«, den Platz, »wo früher eine Scheune stand«, die Steinfläche, »wo früher Gebüsch wurzelte«? [...] Sollte ich den Vokabeln also statt

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>371</sup> See Evelyne Hamann, *Hitlers Wien* (Munich: Piper, 1996), 172ff.

<sup>372</sup> Handke, *Abschied*, 22.

Märchenkraft nicht eher die Wirkung eines Fragebogens zuschreiben: Wie ist es mit mir? Wie ist es mit uns? Wie ist es jetzt?<sup>373</sup>

By pointing to the rift not just between the past and the present, but also between two different periods of nationalist assertion, each of which have lead to completely different outcomes (19<sup>th</sup> century dreams of Slovenian independence vs. Hitler's eastward expansion) those linguistic miniature fairytales are turned from escapist fancies into a questionnaire for critical self-examination. Again, we are faced with an example of spatial and temporal layering: The 19<sup>th</sup> century entries were written during the Austro-Hungarian period, in which Slovenia was merely one of the agricultural provinces at the margins of the empire, and the tools for working the land were more central to collective identity than revolutionary impulses. However, this reference book for absences also reflects back to Filip's Austro-Slovenian dichotomy. The words he finds evoke a history of destruction, extinction and expulsion. What has permanence ("das Überdauernde") is the term for the sound a human body makes when falling (»Schall eines fallenden Körpers«), a powerful sound-image in which Handke encapsulates the violence, surrender and hopelessness of the wars that have been fought since the publication of the dictionary. History shows its mark through the transformation of language: Just as the word for emigration (»die Auswanderung«) came to connote a forced displacement rather than a voluntary relocation after the second World War, the antiquated weapon called "partisan" now points to a new definition which is missing from the book, that of the Socialist resistance fighters. Slovenian partisans played a major role in the liberation of Carinthia from NS rule in May of 1945. The majority of the Yugoslav partisan fighters

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<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 145-46.

were unskilled workers, a significant number of Slovenian peasants among them.<sup>374</sup> Filip's brother Gregor, who attended agricultural school in Maribor unites all these aspects of Slovenian history in himself, being a descendant of rebels and exiles, a farmer, as well as a partisan deserter.

The encounters Handke stages between timeless fairytale and historicity in *Die Wiederholung* are numerous, culminating in Filip's trip to the elevated plains of the Karst region, where geographical isolation, agricultural austerity and social self-sufficiency are markers for a space which is both pre-modern and yet radically progressive: "[...] archaisch [...] nicht in dem Sinn eines »Es war einmal«, sondern eines »Fang an!«."<sup>375</sup> Further on, the Karst (Handke calls it a "land" as if it were an independent enclave) is presented as the only national collective with utopian potential, "als Modell für eine mögliche Zukunft."<sup>376</sup> What happens to those fairytales and utopian enclaves once the cultural and political framework of Yugoslavia, within which they were made possible, is dismantled? A tentative answer can be found in Handke's novel *Die morawische Nacht*, which, written twenty-two years after *Die Wiederholung* takes up many of the motifs that dominate the latter. More importantly, it solidifies his initial observations about Central Europe and brings them to a final conclusion. In a time of increasing globalization and hybridization, myths of transgenerational community and the condensation of time-space are intensified, albeit in a very different manner. The trope of repetition, in the sense of both bringing back and remembering, is carried to a meta-literary level in *Die morawische Nacht*, which contains a network of references to previous motives and works. While traveling to Carinthia, the narrator encounters two fellow writers, "Filip Kobal, der Schreiber aus dem Nachbardorf,"<sup>377</sup> and Gregor Keuschnig, who is the protagonist of Handke's *Die Stunde der wahren Empfindung* (1975). Even more

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<sup>374</sup> See Josef Rausch, *Der Partisanenkampf in Kärnten im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1979).

<sup>375</sup> Handke, *Wiederholung*, 199.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*.

<sup>377</sup> Handke, *Die morawische Nacht*, 419.

importantly, Kobal appears as the director of a World War II movie, as the author walks in on the shooting of a scene with fleeing partisans, which he mistakes for reality:

Die Vergangenheit kehrte zurück, in Szenen des Krieges, auf Leben und Tod. Schon eine Zeitlang vorher war die Stille eine unguete geworden. Gleich würde losgeschlagen. Und dann trat unversehens ein Grüppchen von Partisanen aus dem das Straßenstück säumenden Unterholz, völlig lautlos, ohne das man sich dabei über irgend etwas wunderte.<sup>378</sup>

The return of the past goes hand in hand with a simultaneous proliferation and destabilizing of all mythical structures that have been used to organize it. *Die morawische Nacht*, too, is a travelogue, told during a nightly gathering of male companions that takes place on a house-boat named “Morawische Nacht” on the river Morawa in Serbia. The book is not narrated from the perspective of the protagonist, who is a famous author and resident of the boat, but by an anonymous attendant of the gathering. The host has called a meeting to share the story of his recent turbulent odyssey through Europe, which is characterized as “Rundflucht,” “Irrfahrt,” “Amoklauf.”<sup>379</sup> The boat itself is a heterotopian space that mirrors the rootlessness of the wandering author.<sup>380</sup> It is made to look like a hotel, but no guests are there besides the invited group, it figures as a place of refuge but is not anchored in the river, nor easily accessible from the river bank, and finally, it bears the Yugoslav flag, a national entity which has ceased to exist many years ago. The boat is situated in the Serbian village of Porodin in the Kosovo. Similar to the Karst village in *Die Wiederholung*, it is named an “enclave,” a site of preservation, but unlike the idyllic

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 418.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>380</sup> Foucault calls the ship/boat the heterotopian space par excellence, since it combines mobility with self-sufficiency and shows up as a “a place without a place.” Michel Foucault “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (Spring, 1986), 22-27.

transhistorical Karst it is also a site of contention, of “self-proclaimed exterritoriality” (“autoproklamierte Exterritorialität”) that can be interpreted as a “dangerous provocation.”<sup>381</sup> The boat on the Morawa is not just a Yugoslav relic but also constructed as a distinctly *Balkan* space – the Balkan myth, often referring *pars pro toto* to the Serbian myth (“Restjugoslawien”<sup>382</sup>), has taken over Handke’s Slovenian utopia of the late 1980s. While he previously condemned the term as orientalizing when used with reference to Yugoslavia (“blödsinnige[s] Schlägerwort”) and criticized Slovenia’s appropriation of Central-European identity as deliberately opposed to the “Serbian Balkan,” he now turns it into a proud and defiant attribute.<sup>383</sup> The novel abounds with ethnographic references to Balkan hospitality (“altbewährte Balkansitten”<sup>384</sup>) “balkanese” music and tobacco, and “balkanic” clothing<sup>385</sup>, but also the hyperbolic affirmation of crude Balkan stereotypes:<sup>386</sup> uncontrolled affect which breeds ethnic conflict, and a backwardness relating to geographical remoteness as well as an anti-modern mindset. The Balkans are disruptive (“Balkan und Ruckhaftigkeit, auch das gehörte für ihn

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<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>382</sup> Handke, *Unter Tränen fragend*, 29.

<sup>383</sup> Handke, *Abschied*, 28: “Wie traurig, und auch empörend, wenn jemand wie Milan Kundera noch heute, vor ein paar Wochen, in einem von *Le Monde* veröffentlichten Aufruf zur »Rettung Sloweniens« dieses, zusammen mit Kroatien, vom serbischen »Balkan« abgrenzt und es blind jenem gespenstischen »Zentraleuropa« zuschlägt [...]”

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 15; 31; 25.

<sup>386</sup> Handke’s list of Balkan orientalisms matches Maria Todorova’s in *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009). Todorova and Handke also share a mutual rejection of the Central European discourse of the 1980s, which they both perceive as pro-western and anti-Balkan.

zusammen”<sup>387</sup>) and deeply irrational: its inhabitants do not ask for explanations (“[...] über die Jahre auf dem Balkan [hatte er sich] das Fragen [...] abgewöhnt”<sup>388</sup>), and are prone to violence. When the traveler is leaving Serbia for the Adriatic, he pinpoints the essence of Balkanism with two images that he would never encounter in westernized Croatia: an armed robber and a strangely cultic scene of animal sacrifice: “Nicht mehr auf, im Balkan: das kam aus dem Inneren. Hinter diesem Kalkfelsen da würde keiner mehr hervorspringen mit einer Waffe im Anschlag. Kein Widder ohne Kopf würde verwesend am Wegrand liegen [...] abgerissen dem Tier bei lebendigem Leib mit bloßen Händen.”<sup>389</sup> However, these frightening images are not used to disenchant the Balkan space; just as Filip Kobal is drawn into the fairytale-like experience of Slovenia while being aware of its deceptiveness, the protagonist in *Die morawische Nacht* wants to perceive the Balkans, like one of Grimm’s original fairytales in all their sublime beauty and terror. The essentialist understanding is never questioned – while the Balkans as cultural-spatial construct might be displaced by the advance of Westernization, the attributes associated with it remain the same throughout the novel.

But the real counter-space to the newfound Balkan utopia is not the West in general, or Vienna as the old imperial (and exploitative) capital in particular, but the specter of Central Europe. When the author visits Vienna on his trip to Europe, he loses his orientation and realizes that the city, too, has lost its centrifugal power: “Von dem einst großen Reich war nur das Labyrinth in seinem Zentrum geblieben? Nein, mit dem,

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 122.



wie sagte man?, neugeordneten Europa schien etwas davon zurückgekehrt [...]. Das war kein Reichsgedanke mehr, wenn es den je gegeben hatte, vielmehr eben Weltoffenheit...”<sup>390</sup> Faintly related to and yet stronger than the Habsburg myth, Central Europe is now portrayed as the colonizing force that has taken over the once so sheltered Karst region, which is the last stop the author makes on his return to Serbia, after having traveled through Croatia, Spain, and Austria. It is here, in a country which was the first to secede from the Yugoslav union and is striving to move beyond the Socialist past as quickly as possible, that the protagonist gets together with a few post-Yugoslav friends for a “conference.”<sup>391</sup> Ironically, they find themselves at the very heart of Central European ideology:

[...] im ganzen Karst und seinem Umland war alles Balkanische oder auch nur von ferne daran Erinnernde verfemt, von den Speisen über die Kleidung bis zur Musik (die besonders, nur mitteleuropäische Weisen und Instrumente hatten zu erklingen, am besten Wiener Walzer, und die Radiostationen von Mitteldorf zu Mitteldorf gaben täglich den Ton vor). In der »Mitteldoline«, wie die *Delana Dolina* nun offiziell hieß, herrschte die Mitteleuroparegelung jedoch besonders strikt. Undenkbar da das Erschallen einer Balkanklarinette oder –trompete, das Braten eines Lammes am Spieß (von einem Spanferkel zu schweigen), das Verzehren von rohen Zwiebeln. Tag und Nacht fanden auf dem Grund und an den Hängen der Karstschüssel Mittelfestivals, feierliche Mittelmessen, Lesungen mitteleuropäischer Autoren, Turniere mitteleuropäischer Mannschaften, Mitteleuropa-Kongresse statt.<sup>392</sup>

“Mitteleuropa” as a “newly established norm”<sup>393</sup> has colonized the region and is celebrated as the victory over primitive Balkan customs and mentality. The inundation

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 318.

<sup>391</sup> The term is used in quotation marks throughout, which suggests it is more of an informal intellectual meeting.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 513.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 512.

with cultural events and the commercialization of literature, arts and competitions mimics the tightly organized cultural apparatus of the Yugoslav republic, which staged such celebrations as demonstrations of multiethnic unity and Socialist solidarity. The informal “conference” of friends (all of them foreigners who have lived or worked in the former Yugoslavia at some point) is explained as an old tradition that has been upheld ever since the beginning of the wars in the 1990s, and as such it is as an effort to preserve a common Yugoslav memory beyond time and space. Like the house boat on the Morawa it is an act of resistance to history, a subversion of the political parceling of the region. However, the “conference” in the Karst is supposed to be their last, and upon his return to the “Balkans,” the protagonist finds his world transformed. Similarly to the almost immediate deconstruction of myths in *Die Wiederholung*, all established utopias are questioned at the end: the village has lost its enclave status (“Porodin war doch keine Enklave, nie eine gewesen. Die balkanischen Enklaven lagen woanders,” 556), new borders have been drawn up around it, signs of Western acculturation (marathon runners, villagers with cell phones, expensive cars) abound.<sup>394</sup> The time of fairytales, as the author has stated in a conversation with a fellow writer while visiting his native Austria, is over: “»Gibt es noch Märchen zu erzählen wie die deinigen? – Nein. Oder bestenfalls in Bruchstücken, Märchen, die eine Sekunde dauern.«”<sup>395</sup> In a globalized age of concurring narratives and memories, only glimpses and fragments of the utopian imaginary can prevail. What is left instead is the far more unstable “geography of dreams,” as the last revelatory principle that can be invoked: “–Geographie der Träume, bleib bei mir jetzt und in der Stunde

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 544-45.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 368.

meines Todes.”<sup>396</sup> *Die morawische Nacht* ends, like its predecessor *Die Wiederholung*, in a circular motion: After the author has returned home to his house boat on the Morawa, he awakes in the morning only to find his guests gone, the book that he has been working on overnight disappeared, and the narrative is initiated anew: “Auf sein Schiff hatte der Autor uns geladen mit einem »Kommt her, ich muß euch eine traurige Geschichte erzählen!« Eine traurige Geschichte? Man würde sehen!”<sup>397</sup>. With these last lines, the linearity of events, as well as the validity of previously established heterotopian spaces is completely undermined – this is not a “sad story” about the loss of an old, untainted, pre-modern Europe on the margin, instead it can be reconfigured at will. The geography of dreams perpetuates itself beyond political circumstances, taking on elements of memory and history, fact and fiction, along the way.

### **Conclusion**

Both Handke and Bachmann attempt to balance as well as deconstruct the legacy of Austrian identity, by emphasizing the cracks and fissures that are still visible but not addressed in the postwar period. Their *Mittleuropa* is not centered on Vienna, but on the provinces, in which Carinthia figures as the peripheral starting point for further explorations. In their reconfigurations of Central Europe through the usage of myth, nostalgia, and satire, they expose the complex layering of time and space that is imminent in it. In order to avoid succumbing to sentimental nostalgia, Bachmann takes up the cultural criticism already present in the Austrian interwar writers, and uses it as a counter-narrative to the present experience of European fragmentation and estrangement.

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<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 557.

<sup>397</sup> Ibid; 558.

Reading her adolescent texts such as *Honditschkreuz* serves an important purpose in complementing her approach to the Habsburg myth, since it reveals the complex and contradictory processes at work in the development of her own sense of “Heimat.” Her radio plays for rot-weiss-rot deconstruct the trivial myths of the Second Austrian Republic by approaching remnants of fascism with lighthearted irony, and they also demonstrate the stabilizing effect that the Habsburg myth presented in a time of economic hardship and defeated public morale. Finally, “Drei Wege zum See” represents the culmination of these tendencies, both in her exploration of the multiethnic Habsburg legacy and criticism of the myth that grew out of it.

The creation of a literary utopia which is free of territorial claims and based on a cautious, yet visionary use of the German language that defies its ideological contamination by Nazism is at the center of Bachmann’s and Handke’s utopian poetics. Both see language as a transgressive, utopian force and embrace the transitory space of writing as a remedy for the homelessness they feel in a narrow-minded, truncated Austria. Handke, like Bachmann, displays an ambivalent relationship to the Habsburg legacy: while memories of the empire figure prominently in *Die Wiederholung*, they are never used in conjunction with postwar Austria, which remains unredeemed. In contrast to Bachmann, for whom the provinces carry the potential for an enriched, more open-minded conception of Austrian identity, they are cast as spaces of entrapment in Handke. The need for a transnational European utopia is instead transposed to Socialist Yugoslavia which is presented as the true spiritual home of the jaded Westerner and a space of authentic experience. With the dissolution of the Socialist republic in the early 1990s, this utopia is moved even further east, to the Balkans as an archaic mythical

refuge. Handke's novel *Die morawische Nacht* shows how the Balkan myth of authentic living, transnational community and proud marginality has replaced the failed myth of Socialism as well as that of a gentrified *Mittleuropa*. Instead of a simple rehashing of old binaries of which Handke has been accused (west against east, Austria vs. Slovenia or Yugoslavia), he attempts to recreate the transnational *millieux de memoire* that have been lost after 1945 via new stylistic choices and the evocative power of one-word fairytales. To him, *Mittleuropa* is both a revisionist project that seeks to occlude the Austrian fascist past, as well as the experimental playground of a neo-nationalist, capitalist Austria that is seeking to expand its economic reach. In the latter form, it brings about the spiritual impoverishment of a hybrid space and as such it figures as a terrifying reincarnation of the Pangerman dream of a homogenized, enslaved east. What has been neglected in criticism so far is the fact that Handke's myth-making is intelligent and reversible, since it is aware of the precariousness of truth-making in the post-ideological world. In this he resembles Bachmann, who borrows motifs and characters from the *Mittleuropa* of the 1920s and 30s not just for mere representation, but to put them in provocative dialogue with the postwar reality. Both authors oppose the postwar trend of engaged writing and realism as *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, since they consider it schematic, hypocritical and ultimately ineffective. At the same time, they align themselves with Konrad's notion of antipolitics by juxtaposing art to facile political analyses, and by offering a critical treatment of the past within their own literary utopias. Handke and Bachmann demonstrate the postwar development of *Mittleuropa* from a perceived Habsburg myth to a new branch of anti-Heimatliteratur in which tropes of collective Austrian memory are consistently overwritten. Their focus on the South Slavic

legacy in that memory space prefigures the relocation of the *Mitteleuropa* debate to the eastern margins that occurred in the 1980s, but also the unexpected role that Yugoslavia would attain in the Central European history of nations at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Chapter 3: *Mittleuropa* as a Conflicted Community in Danilo Kiš and Aleksandar Tišma**

#### **Historical Overview**

Two main assumptions underlie my comparison of the postwar debates on Central Europe in Austria and Yugoslavia respectively: one is the precarious manner in which both countries handled the memory of the Second World War, fascism and the Shoah. As my chapter on Ingeborg Bachmann and Peter Handke has shown, Austrian writers who were still children or adolescents during the war were facing a double challenge: on one hand they were appalled by the postwar national myth of Austrian victimhood and the collective renunciation of responsibility, which was necessarily complemented by the foregrounding of the golden age of Habsburg Austria: the recent, uncomfortable past was replaced by a more removed, but glorious one. On the other hand, young non-Jewish authors writing after 1945 also had to come to terms with their parents' potential involvement in fascism, which had a crucial influence on their own poetics. Even though they rejected the concept of being a national victim, their individual histories also made identification with the real victims (particularly Austrian Jews) morally problematic. Bachmann's and Handke's recurrence to literary models of identity that are fluid, hybrid, multiethnic and multilingual constitutes an alternative way of resisting the official Austrian postwar narrative. Through the lens of literary voices that are divided and damaged by the insufferable status quo, history and memory can finally be explored in a more critical light.

In the newly founded Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia, different political circumstances lead to a similar postwar situation in which open public memory debates

were effectively stalled or repressed. A clean historical slate was needed to stabilize a federation that included twenty-four official ethnic groups (six of which were considered constitutive), and it was provided by the following narrative: Since all Yugoslavs had been victims of Nationalist-Socialist occupation, which they had heroically defeated through the joined effort of the Partisans, the slogan *brotherhood and unity* (“bratstvo i jedinstvo”) became the national doctrine after the war, for the sake of which other truths or memories were either suppressed or highly edited. Amongst such uncomfortable and potentially divisive truths were the crimes committed on Jews, Serbs and Roma by the Nazi puppet state of independent Croatia (Nezavisna Država Hrvatska, NDH), as well as the massacres carried out by Partisan forces on prisoners of war and those perceived as collaborators. The expulsion of ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche) can also be included here. Even though the right to secession was included in the Yugoslav constitution from the beginning, separatist tendencies were met with harsh responses, as demonstrated in the defeat of the Croatian Spring in 1971.<sup>398</sup>

Despite the fact the official commemoration specifically of Jewish victims in Yugoslavia started quite early compared to other European countries (in 1952, the first five Holocaust monuments were unveiled), they were not considered unique in the large mass of the “victims of fascism.” Jewish communities under the umbrella of Yugoslav socialism reciprocated this official stance by blending in as much as possible, be it through their decidedly secular lifestyles or their loyalties to the Yugoslav identity.<sup>399</sup>

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<sup>398</sup> See John Lampe, *Yugoslavia as History. Twice there was a country* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>399</sup> Yugoslav citizens of pure or mixed Jewish heritage were amongst those ethnic groups that frequently declared themselves as “Yugoslav” in national censuses, making the estimation of the



However, public discussions of the Ustaša (Croatian fascist) regime were avoided for fear of ethnic tensions between Serbs and Croats. For the same reason, the site of the largest Croatian concentration camp Jasenovac was razed immediately after the war, and it was not until 1962 that a memorial and museum were established there.<sup>400</sup> Moreover, the country severed diplomatic relationships with Israel in 1967 due to the Six-Day War, denouncing the “Zionist imperialist aggression.”<sup>401</sup> All these facts just serve to illustrate the Socialist republic’s fraught relationship with its recent past and explain why the exploration of memory was relegated to the alternative channels of art and literature. Despite the fact that official commemorations of massacres were part of the collective self-fashioning, they were highly ideologized and thus did not serve the purpose of coming to terms with the past.<sup>402</sup> It was not until the 1970s, that novels dealing with fascism or the Holocaust in the former Yugoslavia became widely acclaimed. Among the most important ones are Borislav Pekić’s *How to Quiet a Vampire* (1977), Danilo Kiš’s, *Garden, Ashes* (1965) and *Hourglass* (1972), as well as Aleksandar Tišma’s *The Book of Blam* (1972). All of these authors left Yugoslavia at some point for ideological reasons at some point, while Kiš and Pekić were considered *personae non-grata* after literary scandals, Tišma opted for voluntary exile during the Yugoslav secession wars of 1990s.

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actual Jewish population in socialist Yugoslavia more difficult. See Paul Benjamin Gordiejew, *Voices of Yugoslav Jewry* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1999).

<sup>400</sup> See the home page of the Jasenovac memorial museum and site, <http://www.jasenovac.org/whatwasjasenovac.php>. Accessed on Feb 12,<sup>th</sup> 2014.

<sup>401</sup> Emil Kerenji, *Jewish Citizens of Socialist Yugoslavia: Politics of Identity in a Socialist State, 1944 -1974* (PhD diss.: University of Michigan, 2008), 24.

<sup>402</sup> Todor Kuljić, *Kultura Sećanja* (Belgrade: Čigoja, 2006).

The territories of the former Yugoslavia are not commonly included in debates on Central Europe due to one main reason: Historically, politically and geographically, the region has always defied easy categorizations, being situated in the contact zone of the Habsburg and Ottoman Empires, with frequent interferences from Czarist Russia. For those who understand “Mitteleuropa” to be mostly referring to a nostalgic Austrian literature of the 1920s and 30s, the region’s historical patchy affiliation with the Habsburg Empire is somewhat problematic. While Slovenia, Croatia and most of Bosnia were under Habsburg rule until 1918, the Ottoman presence remained in parts of Serbia as well as Macedonia until the first Balkan War in 1912.<sup>403</sup> Two of the major literary figures of Socialist Yugoslavia, the Croatian Miroslav Krleža and the Bosnian Serb Ivo Andrić, describe the Habsburg period as oppressive rather than idyllic, in particular Krleža is known for his acerbic depictions of the Habsburg petty bourgeoisie. So what made “Mitteleuropa” relevant for the Yugoslavs, both in the early postwar period and during the dissident discourse in the 1980s? In its second manifestation, when a common heritage of Central Europe was invoked by Kundera, Konrád and Miłosz between 1984 and 1989 to counter the culture-effacing effects of Soviet occupation, Yugoslavia took on an in-between position as well. While the country’s Socialist system clearly separated it from the west, its non-aligned status allowed for living conditions that differed considerably from what Kundera bemoaned in his influential 1984 polemic “Un occident kidnappé.” But while Yugoslavs were free to travel, faced relatively little censorship and had access to Western literature and film, Kundera’s observation of a fragmented and inaccessible cultural memory was theirs as well.

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<sup>403</sup> Serbia gained its independence from the Ottomans with the establishment of the Kingdom of Serbia after the Berlin Congress of 1878, but the region of Kosovo remained under Ottoman control until 1912.

This might explain the passionate Yugoslav response to the debate on Central Europe, which varied widely across the different republics, thereby pointing to the internal divisions that were to escalate in the violent disintegration of the Yugoslav federation only a few years later. The idea of Central Europe sparked antagonisms and was considered by many loyal Yugoslavs a dangerous tendency towards separatism. Perceiving themselves as shareholders of the Habsburg experience, Slovenian writers like Drago Jančar enthusiastically affirmed their membership in the community of Central Europeans, while the Croatian response, in spite of equal rights to the claim expressed more skepticism, aptly summarized in two special editions of the literary magazine *Gordogan*, published in Zagreb in 1985 and 1987.<sup>404</sup> At best, it was understood as a revival of Habsburg nostalgia that was both banal and out of touch with reality, as deprecating titles such as “Central Europe: A Dream Mirage” and “Central Europe – Variations on a theme long gone” [Varijacije na propalu temu] suggest. The latter included images from a Habsburg cookbook and a sub-section sarcastically titled “Central Europe and the empire of pastries.”<sup>405</sup> Those two essays can also be read as retorts to two foundational contributions to the debate, György Konrád’s “Is the Dream of Central Europe Still Alive?” (1986) and Danilo Kiš’s “Variations on Central European Themes” (1987), which I will discuss in more detail further into the chapter. The tenor of the Croatian essays in *Gordogan* was aligned with the gloomy, satirical picture painted of Habsburg rule in the writings of the expressionist Croatian author Miroslav Krleža. On an even more critical note, Kundera was accused of glossing over the German expansionist

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<sup>404</sup> See the *Gordogan* special issues on Central Europe in 1985 and 1987. The first special edition included a translation of Kundera’s essay, the second a response by György Konrád.

<sup>405</sup> “Varijacije na propalu temu” (257 -272) by Branimir Donat and “Central Europe – a Dream Mirage” by Branko Despot (212-213), both in *Gordogan*, 1987.

history behind “Mitteleuropa,” in whose service a previously geographical designation was turned into a projection screen for Wilhelmine and Habsburg fantasies of economic expansion and cultural supremacy.<sup>406</sup> Finally, Serbian authors, historically leaning more towards Russia and Pan-Slavism, expressed the greatest discomfort with Kundera’s Central Europe, which they considered a pro-Western and elitist concept that promised nothing but trouble.<sup>407</sup> As has been pointed out by Handke, the annual literary convention in Vilenica, Slovenia, which was established in 1986, served as an important mouthpiece for the new debate.

In this chapter, I would like to examine the imaginaries of Central Europe as they surface in the writings of Danilo Kiš and Aleksandar Tišma, two Yugoslav Jewish writers from the Vojvodina region already mentioned above. I am particularly interested in the ways in which Kiš and Tišma prefigure the debate of the 1980s on one hand, and map out Central Europe as a space of violence and traumatic memory on the other. With both authors, the construction of Central Europe as a space of gaping loss goes back to the early 1960s. In spite of many similarities (their mixed ethnic heritage, their upbringing in the multi-lingual Vojvodina province, the common themes of the Holocaust), their writings have not been discussed comparatively so far. This may be due to the age gap between those two authors (Kiš was born in 1935, Tišma in 1924), which resulted in some substantial differences in their poetics. Tišma had almost finished high school when the Hungarians occupied Novi Sad in 1942, fled to Budapest that same year

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<sup>406</sup> Ivo Banac, “Milan Kundera i povratak Srednje Evrope,” *Gordogan* 9 (I), 1987, 39-46. Banac traces the colonializing usage of the term from Metternich over List to Naumann.

<sup>407</sup> Vladimir Zorić, “Discordia Concors. Central Europe in Post-Yugoslav Discourses,” in *After Yugoslavia: The Cultural Spaces of a Vanished Land*, ed. Radmila Gorup (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 88-113.

and returned to fight with Tito's partisans in 1944, when Kiš was only seven years old. A journalist and writer since the 1950s, Tišma only became more widely known in the 1980s, when his novels were translated. *Book of Blam* appeared in 1972, the same year as Kiš's *Hourglass*, the latter of which earned the prestigious NIN-prize. It is astounding that both books were examining, in their own ways, the events and aftermath of the Novi Sad massacre, while, it appears, there was no dialogue between the authors themselves. How much Kiš had read Tišma remains unclear, in his private library, only one book by his fellow author is preserved, *The Use of Man* from 1981.<sup>408</sup> Kiš was clearly more of a public, engaged intellectual than Tišma, they knew of each other but were not friendly. To Kiš, Tišma symbolized a more stern, conservative generation that was rooted in Habsburg gallantry.<sup>409</sup>

The way they relate the Novi Sad massacre, one of the most horrific carnages during the Holocaust in Yugoslavia, is indicative of their relationship to memory and storytelling. Between Jan 21<sup>st</sup> and 23rd, 1942, Horthy's fascists shot almost 900 Jews on the frozen Danube, shoving the dead bodies into a hole in the ice specifically created for this purpose. Kiš's father only escaped death because the opening became clogged and was sent home along with the others waiting in line. Kiš relates this episode not from his own experience (he was left at home with his mother and sister) but still claims witness consciousness:

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<sup>408</sup> See the Kiš's library catalogue at "Danilo Kiš, 1935-1989," <http://www.Kiš.org.rs>, website dedicated to Danilo Kiš established between 1999 -2010.  
<http://www.Kiš.org.rs/web/Bzivot/B/E/index.htm>

<sup>409</sup> Interview with Mirjana Miočinović, Aug 7, 2014 in Belgrade.

At the age of seven, I was witness in the Hungarian-occupied Novi Sad of the massacre of Serbs and Jews perpetrated by the Hungarian fascists. On this day, my father was saved by a miracle. The miracle was that the holes that they cut into the ice of the Danube to lower the corpses became overcrowded. So he got an extension of two years before he was deported to Auschwitz.<sup>410</sup>

Precisely because it was not witnessed in person, the loss of his father and the terror of institutionalized violence formed the moral imperative behind Kiš's work. From a basic skepticism towards knowable facts about the atrocities of history, Kiš developed his notion that fiction should serve as "a corrective of history."<sup>411</sup> The witness accounts in his fiction are delivered by the marginalized and the disenfranchised, such as in his Holocaust novel *Garden, Ashes*, which is told from the perspective of a boy. Moreover, a facile distinction between subjective memory and objective history is often prevented through the insertion of false documents into the text (a letter, a report, encyclopedia entries) by which he seeks to trace the lifelines of people who vanished without leaving any traces in history books. In his creation of a pseudo-historical documentary method Kiš relies heavily on the Argentinian author Jorge Luis Borges (1899-1986). By inserting authentic documents next to apocryphal reports, folk myths, and literary quotations, he conjures a sense of reality that is more complex and more immanently critical than the psychological realism he abhorred.<sup>412</sup> But it is only in its application in postwar literature that Borges' poetics of magic realism unfolds its full impact, as Kiš maintains. Through the ethical imperative that determines all writings after 1945, his own

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<sup>410</sup> Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, 229.

<sup>411</sup> Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, 206.

<sup>412</sup> Tomislav Z. Longinović, "Danilo Kiš: History, Horror and Performance in the Tomb for Boris Davidovich," in *Borderline Culture. The Politics of Identity in Four Twentieth Century Slavic Novels* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1993), 109-111.

narratives turn into “fables of historical, even political relevance” since they break through the “metaphysical timelessness” that pervades Borges’s work.<sup>413</sup>

Tišma, on the other hand, who is more committed to historical realism, fictionalizes this event in his short story “Without A Cry” and in his novel *The Book of Blam*, where he describes it in harsh detail. In an interview many years later, he explained that it was the decades he spent living in Novi Sad that compelled him to write about the crimes committed during World War II. Passing through the same streets again and again, he was confronted with the absence of those who were murdered or exiled. The witnesses in Tišma’s novels are people who do not invoke the reader’s sympathy and who have trouble feeling sympathy themselves, such as the lone survivor Blam, who escaped murder because he married a Christian, or the former Kapo Viktor Lamian, who seeks absolution from his camp victims. Experiences of violence and displacement define the Central European space in Kiš’s and Tišma’s writings long before the onset of 1980s debate, thereby following the responsibility of the new Central European intellectual to escape the vacuum of history as formulated by György Konrád.

### **Danilo Kiš – Central Europe as Cultural Network and Collage of Memories**

I would like to begin by explaining Kiš’s involvement in the debate on Central Europe first, and then move on to corroborate the points he makes in his essayistic pieces by selections from his fiction. My focus will be on Kiš’s short fiction, which, while sharing many of the dialectical themes of his novels (memory vs. history, myth vs. fiction,

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<sup>413</sup> Kiš as quoted in Andreas Leitner, “Examen de la obra de Herbert Quain” und “Grobnica za Borisa Davidoviča,” in *Entgrenzte Repräsentationen, gebrochene Realitäten: Danilo Kiš im Spannungsfeld von Ethik, Literatur und Politik*, ed. Angela Richter and Tatjana Petzer (Munich: Otto Sagner, 2001), 158.

individual vs. collective) starting in the 1970s until the 1980s demonstrates what he has called a Central European poetics in an even more condensed form. Structurally, this entails a mix of pseudo-documentary elements (encyclopedia entries, letters, witness accounts, photographs), anecdotes/snapshots, literary quotes and intertextual references (also to other texts of his), along with a stark fragmentation of the text into separate, sometimes numbered paragraphs. Just as some of his essays border on the literary (the “Variations” are a particularly striking example), the short prose sometimes includes discussions on literary form and ethics.

Danilo Kiš, who had already been living in Kundera’s Paris since 1979, was part of the discussion of Central Europe from its beginning, and is certainly the most influential among the Yugoslav respondents to Kundera’s provocative call to arms for the rescue of Central Europe. He knew all the major contributors personally, and maintained a close friendship with György Konrád, which explains his regular attendance at roundtables and conventions on the topic.<sup>414</sup> In 1987, he published a collection of thirty-eight essayistic miniatures under the title “Variations on Central European Themes” (“Varijacije na srednoevropske teme”<sup>415</sup>). It is the most complex and delicately balanced contribution to the debate, situating Central Europe as a space of intersecting cultures, a repository of memory, and a literary network. His vision of this space is both dystopian,

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<sup>414</sup> As has been already mentioned in the previous chapter on Peter Handke, Kiš attended the Vilenica convention, as well as the Budapest roundtable in 1989, shortly before his untimely death. The “Budapest roundtable” was a gathering of ten authors (besides Kiš, the group included the Hungarian authors György Konrád, Peter Esterhazy and Miklos Meszoly, the Italian writer Claudio Magris, the Austrian author H.C. Artmann, the Estonian author Paul-Erik Rummo, Russian novelist Edward Limonov, as well as the Polish writers Adam Michnik and Czeslaw Milosz). See “The Budapest Roundtable” in *Cross Currents. A Yearbook of Central European Culture*, Volume 10 (1991): 17-30.

<sup>415</sup> Danilo Kiš, “Varijacije na srednoevropske teme,” *Gradac*, maj-avgust 1987, special issue dedicated to Kiš.



due to its histories of violence and displacement, as well mildly nostalgic, due to the unique art and literature that originated in it. Kiš refutes Kundera's essentialisms and binaries (labeling Russia as the new other, blaming Pan-Slavism for the decline of the region) as well as any romantization of the Habsburg period, expounding on the volatile legacy of empire in the Central European sphere. Kiš's essay is unique in that it both affirms the idea of a characteristic Central European culture but also points out its pitfalls.

Already the formal structure supports Kiš's dialectical endeavor: the "Variations," which allude to musical terminology, are various paragraphs of different length, some merely consisting of a short quote, others containing whole anecdotes or theoretical excursions.<sup>416</sup> In spite of the chronological numbering, there are no cogent connections between paragraphs besides the shared theme. By having each vignette stand on its own and yet placed within the whole, the fragment and the network are established as guiding tropes in the essay. Form mirrors content, so that the variations stand for the multifold, contradicting, divided and yet intertwined experience of Central Europe. To add even more complexity, seemingly objective musings (miniature explorations of fin de siècle Vienna, the Hungarian Nyugat poets, Serbian Pan-Slavism etc.) are occasionally joined by a first person narrative to emphasize the subjective nature of these observations.

At the heart of the "Variations" is the principle of thesis-antithesis, that is, a common assumption or complaint about the main "theme" will first be stated and confirmed, only to be countered later in the text (and not chronologically). Synthesis, Kiš seems to suggest, is not possible or even desirable, and if at all, it can only be achieved

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<sup>416</sup>Danilo Kiš, "Varijacije na srednjoevropske teme," in Danilo Kiš, *Život, Literatura* (Belgrade Beogradski izdavačko-graficki zavod (BIGZ), 1995), 35-57.

on the personal level. Therefore, the essay begins by acknowledging the main point of criticism in the debate, the vague and uncertain character of Central Europe:

With no clear boundaries – and no center or several – “Central Europe” is coming more and more to resemble the Dragon of Alca in Book II of Anatole France’s *Penguin Island*, the beast with which people used to compare the symbolist movement: No one who claimed to have seen it could say what it looked like.<sup>417</sup>

It is quite striking that while his comparison places the “Central Europe” in the fictional realm, it also affirms the reality of the movement, or its thinkers behind it. The fact this imagined space cannot be reduced to one straightforward formula does not mean that it is not rooted in real life circumstances. Vignette number 32 counters the vagueness with concrete literary experience. The “idea” may be abstract, but the space from which Central Europeans write leads to palpable results:

Why is it when I read the works of Andrzej Kusniewicz, a Pole born in 1904, or Peter Esterhazy, a Hungarian born in 1950, I find something in the way they put things that draws them close to me, a Central European poetics if you will? What is the tone, the vibration that situates a work within that magnetic field? Above all, the inherent presence of culture: the form of allusion, reminiscence, or reference to the whole European heritage, a consciousness of the work that does not destroy its spontaneity, a careful balance between ironic pathos and lyrical flight. Not much. Everything.<sup>418</sup>

The “Central European” poetics that Kiš so struggles to capture is based on affinities, which are in turn influenced by the undeniable cultural history of a space that transcends the specificity of different nations and generations. The interreferentiality of writings that spring from this “magnetic field” is based both on the cross-sections of different languages, ethnicities and cultures in the urban nodes of Central Europe, as well as the palimpsestic presence of different pasts (“reminiscences”). The “careful balance between

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<sup>417</sup> Danilo Kiš, “Variations on Central European Themes,” 95.

<sup>418</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

ironic pathos and lyrical flight” might be hard to understand at first, but Kiš is referring to Konrád’s claim that irony combined with pathos is a formal imperative for the Central European writer: It reflects both his powerlessness to fight an oppressive environment which makes his existence ironic, while the dramatic necessity with which he must try to do so nevertheless creates pathos.<sup>419</sup> The balance of contradictory tropes points to the imbalance of power on the political plane. In this case, irony should not be understood as the classical literary trope of saying the opposite of what one actually means. The irony Kiš and Konrad are talking about is the experience of living under an ideological system which is so absolute that it becomes absurd in daily experience; and it is this experience that enters the text. In Kiš’s case, it expresses itself not so much in ironic, dark humor as in the perpetual evocation of contradictions.

Even without the experience of Soviet life, Kiš was able to identify with Konrad’s stance, since the debunking of totalitarian systems and the suffering they caused had been his literary mission from the beginning. While his early work up until the late 1970s was dedicated to his own family’s destruction through fascism, his later writing strove to expose the horrors of Stalinism. In 1978 he published the story collection *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, which, except for one story that is set during the time of the Inquisition, retraces the lifelines of Jewish communists who fall prey to the deadly machinery of Stalinist terror.<sup>420</sup> In his poetic manifesto, “Advice to a Young Writer,” his stance is summed up succinctly: “Should anyone tell you Kolyma was different from Auschwitz,

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<sup>419</sup> György Konrád, “Is The Dream Of Central Europe Still Alive?,” 109-121.

<sup>420</sup> Danilo Kiš, *Grobница za Borisa Davidoviča: sedam poglavija jedne zajedničke povesti* (Belgrade: Beogradski izdavačko-grafički zavod, 1992).

tell him to go to hell.”<sup>421</sup> In variation number 27, fascism and Communism are listed as the “two major traumas” that were experienced by the Central European Jewish intellectuals, who, after all, were labeled the region’s “cultural ferment” by Kundera. Kiš addresses the elephant in the room, for Kundera had, in a questionable analogy, managed to evoke the extermination of European Jewry as a gloomy prospect for the whole region without expounding on the true extent of the horrors that the location “Auschwitz” denotes: “After the destruction of the Austrian empire, Central Europe lost its ramparts. Didn't it lose its soul after Auschwitz, which swept the Jewish nation off its map?”<sup>422</sup> Furthermore, Kundera was silent about the postwar waves of anti-Semitism in Soviet satellite states and their “uncompromisingly anti-Israeli line” which is why, according to Kiš, “throughout the Central European basin, talking and writing about being Jewish [became] a source of embarrassment.”<sup>423</sup> In fact, five of the variations deal specifically with the Jewish question and refer to writers such as Arthur Koestler and Franz Kafka as tragic examples for typical Central European figures precisely because of their conflicted Jewish identities. The hybrid existence and flexibility for which Jews are idealized by Kundera comes at the price of self-denial, as Kiš suggests with a personal anecdote:

When the wife of a Hungarian writer, the product of a successful cross-fertilization, was asked by Kosztolanyi’s widow, “Where are you from, my beautiful child?” (in a kind of Central European version of Snow White), she replied “The Carpathians,” a response no less ambiguous than the query. Later, in private, the beautiful woman’s husband recounted to me his theory of assimilation, which, though identical to Koestler’s, he had clearly arrived at his own. “I am fifty percent Jewish by blood. My wife is the same. In two generations, even that will be lost. Being Jewish is a curse.” Here, too, he was un-consciously

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<sup>421</sup> Danilo Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, 126.

<sup>422</sup> Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” 11.

<sup>423</sup> Kiš, “Variations,” 109.

paraphrasing someone else, this time Heine: “Being Jewish is a *Familienunglück*.”  
A family calamity.

The previously mentioned network of literary references to Grimm’s fairytales, Arthur Koestler, and Heinrich Heine is embedded in this anecdote as much as the aforementioned “embarrassment” of Jewishness as a typical phenomenon of the postwar Central European space. In the same vein, the “explosion of genius”<sup>424</sup> in early 20th century Vienna, mostly owed to the Jewish bourgeoisie, is juxtaposed by Kiš to the “intellectual provincialism”<sup>425</sup> brought onto the whole region, including the formerly enticing capital after the disappearance of Central European Jewry. Furthermore, unlike Kundera, who considers the nationalist impulse beneficial, since it contributes to the self-consciousness of the minor and occupied Central European peoples, Kiš cites the Jews of Central Europe as both mitigating element for nationalism and favorite nemesis of nationalists: “[...] nationalist organizations and the democratic internationalist reflexes to them took shape in connection with or reaction to the region’s Jewish population.”<sup>426</sup> He admonishes the reader that regional identities and nationalism are not at odds with each other, thereby responding to the accusation raised against Kundera of being exclusivist and chauvinist in his championing of the ‘center’ versus the ‘east’ (Russia): “A desire for European culture often takes the form of national pride (“We are Europe”) and antagonism (“And you aren’t”), echoing the colonialist divide criticized by Edward Said a few years earlier:

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<sup>424</sup> Kiš, “Variations,” 101.

<sup>425</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>426</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

Orientalism is never far away from what Denys Hay has called the idea of Europe, a collective notion identifying “us” Europeans against “those” non-Europeans, and indeed it can be argued that the major component in European culture is precisely what made that culture hegemonic both in and outside Europe: the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures.<sup>427</sup>

In order to circumvent this tendency, Kiš, who had defined nationalism as “collective paranoia,”<sup>428</sup> supported the claim to a “genealogical stem of Europe [...]” that is more diversified, “whose eastern branches belong to the same root, are nourished by the same sap of medieval times, of religion(s), the Renaissance, the Baroque age; »Central Europe« also refers to the legitimate wish that this common heritage be acknowledged, in spite or *precisely because of* all differences.”<sup>429</sup> This passionate endorsement of pluralism in unity distinguishes itself from the Habsburg myth of multicultural, carefree togetherness, which Kiš finds as suspicious as the pessimistic assessment of old Austria as the “prison of nations.”<sup>430</sup> The notion of Central Europe then, is certainly not synonymous with the Habsburg myth, since the old reference point of Vienna has been replaced with the postwar *lieux de memoire* of Yalta and Helsinki. Kiš refers to both cities as symbols for the division of Europe, the Yalta Conference on Jan 4-11, 1945, where the partition of the defeated territories was decided, and the Helsinki conference on security and co-operation in Europe during July and August of 1975, which was supposed

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<sup>427</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1997), 7.

<sup>428</sup> Kiš, “The Gingerbread Heart, or Nationalism,” in *Homo Poeticus*, 15-34.

<sup>429</sup> Taken from the Serbo-Croatian original in *Život, literatura*, 45, my translation. I believe that the translation of “genealoško stablo” (lit: “genealogical stem”) into “family tree” in the English edition is not the ideal choice.

<sup>430</sup> Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, 96.

to improve East-West relations (and in retrospect, is considered as having given encouragement to many dissident voices) but which Kiš obviously considered a failure.

The Central European experience after 1945 includes cultural fragmentation by either state-controlled oppression and harassment or exile. By looking at the Central European writer as a paradigmatic figure, Kiš synecdochically captures the space from which he originates, and which defines him even after he has been forced out of his socio-cultural environment. Kiš includes two “variations” on the tragedy of exile right after those discussing the fate of Jewish intellectuals – the displacement that occurs due to Cold War conditions is therefore seen in continuity of the displacement brought about by Hitler’s dream of an ethnically pure Greater Germany. He echoes many of the concerns that Jewish writers who had fled their German speaking environment and lost their German audience had voiced before him when he says that “[l]anguage is destiny. Every attempt to tamper with a writer’s linguistic integrity is hazardous, fraught with danger.” This is because writers “[...] write with their entire being, with ethos and mythos, with memory, tradition, and culture, with the impetus of linguistic associations [...].”<sup>431</sup> Accordingly, the exiled Central European author writing in a minor language faces even harsher circumstances, since he cannot present a famous literary tradition as his “*lettre de noblesse*.”<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid., 113.

Kiš's literary estate contains an additional "variation," published along with other fragments in his collected works in 1995.<sup>433</sup> It is a characterization of the Central European writer, which has a recognizable autobiographical streak to it and was perhaps excluded for that reason; it is also much longer than the longest vignette in the "Variations." A small part of the fragment was actually used for the "Variations" -- it contains a slightly altered version of the "writing with your whole being" quote above. In an inversion of Deleuze and Guattari, who define minor literature as being written in a major language while living in a marginal country (for example, Kafka),<sup>434</sup> Central European literature is written in minor languages while its authors live in the territory of a major (Western) European language. Kiš puts the dilemma of linguistic exile at the heart of the Central European writer's estrangement:

He is around fifty years old – certainly no less – and lives in exile (like Kundera), writing in his mother tongue: Czech, Slovak, Polish Hungarian, Serbo-Croatian, perhaps Yiddish (though he seems too young for that). Whichever it is, he writes it like a dead language, which only makes it more precious. He still speaks and reads French, German, Hungarian, Russian, he's been bilingual since birth and learned the others later, but everyone asks him – this solitary (as it seems to him) guardian of his far-off and close-up mother tongue, they all want to know why he doesn't write in French, German, English – and he's already explained a hundred times that one does not write with a language but with one's whole being [...] For he – and this is truly what Central European writers do – drags around a terrible burden of linguistic and musical melodies, he hauls a piano and a dead horse behind him, along with everything that has been played on that piano and everything that the horse once bore into battle and into defeat – marble statues and bronze bearded busts, pictures in baroque frames, words and melodies that nobody can understand outside that language, *realia* which in other languages need to be explained with long footnotes – the wide world of unknown allusions, wars, epic poems, epic heroes, historical and cultural data, Turkisms,

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<sup>433</sup> Danilo Kiš, "Fragment – Varijacije na srednjoevropske teme", 315-317. English translation taken from Mark Thompson, *Birth Certificate. The Story of Danilo Kiš* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 273-275.

<sup>434</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).



Germanisms, Magyarisms, Arabisms, each with its clear and precise semi-tone.  
[...]<sup>435</sup>

Along with his minor language, the exiled Central European authors carries with him the whole burden of cultural memory, and within that burden specifically the legacies of art and history as captured in the metaphors of the piano and the dead war horse. The network of references that was pointed out in the “Variations” before is deciphered here in a concrete Yugoslav context, in which the multicultural etymology of Serbo-Croatian as shaped by centuries of alternating empires and geopolitical shifts becomes a condensed transmitter of personal legacy. The importance of imagery in Kiš’s writing, the “pictures in baroque frames” will be of central interest in the texts I analyze. Constructing an authentic image, one might even say a panoramic painting of Central Europe, both as he remembers and imagines it, is one of the main objectives of his poetics.

But the evocation of these images is of course contingent upon the multilayered, complex linguistic inheritance of his upbringing. Tracking the influence of languages, be it through his own multi-lingual influences or by decoding the foreign impressions on the official Slavic idiom spoken in socialist Yugoslavia, Kiš also draws a linguistic map of his own biography: having grown up in the Serbian province of the Vojvodina close to the Hungarian border, he learned Serbo-Croatian and Hungarian, his mother’s and father’s native tongues respectively. Coming from a middle class Habsburg Hungarian-Jewish family, his father spoke German, passing down some to his son. After his father was deported to Auschwitz, the mother and her children fled to Hungary, from where they relocated to Cetinje in Montenegro in 1947, his mother’s hometown. After years

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<sup>435</sup> Thompson, *Birth Certificate*, 273-74.

spent in Hungary, Kiš had to re-familiarize himself with a Serbo-Croatian environment in Montenegro, and subsequently during his student days in Belgrade re-kindled his passion for the language when studying comparative literature. Until his death, he insisted on the official designation Serbo-Croatian, even though he was using the Serbian variant in the Latin alphabet (instead of Cyrillic, which was more wide-spread in Serbia). The Habsburg experience was something he was reminded of with every Germanism and Magyarism that appeared in the works of the authors he was reading, just as the Turkisms and Arabisms that surfaced in Serbian and Bosnian literature (less commonly so in Croatian) were remnants of the Ottoman empire. What is remarkable about this passage is that by including the Ottomans as a notable influence on the “fifty-year old” Central European writer, who, even with the obvious parallelisms to Kiš’s own life, is also meant to represent a generic type, the Central European space is subtly shifted towards the Balkans -- a region completely excluded from the whole debate about Mitteleuropa until then. Even though Kundera’s essay mentions Kiš as “my good friend” and one of the notable Jews so vital for the culture of Central Europe,<sup>436</sup> his internal map of the region is clearly oriented towards those areas of Central Europe marked by the Baroque period and Catholicism. Kiš’s conscious broadening of Central Europe, on the other hand, is connected to the dislike for national particularisms also reflected in his fiction: names of states or cities are rare in his writings, even the term “Yugoslavia” only appears once.<sup>437</sup> The only exception is *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich*, which includes a map of all the locations of the various narratives that make up the book to illustrate the disastrous reach of Stalinist terror. Central Europe, then, is attractive to Kiš as a cultural designation

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<sup>436</sup> Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” 7.

<sup>437</sup> Mark Thompson, *Birth Certificate*, 22.

precisely because of its openness and the difficulty to appropriate it in one definitive way. Moreover, declaring himself alternatively Central European and Yugoslav after his move to Paris connected him, especially in the early 1980s, to a large multinational community. After the widespread appropriation of the term with which it lost its originally subversive meaning,<sup>438</sup> he gave up even on that, as his autobiographer Mark Thompson writes:

“Being a Yugoslav writer in Paris means being alone,” he observed. For no one understood the strange territory that was his homeland. Asked at parties where he came from, he gave up on his beloved category of “Europe central,” and replaced it with “Africa centrale,” pronouncing centrale savagely à l’italiano.<sup>439</sup>

Through this ironic gesture (with “Africa centrale” evoking even stronger colonialisms and orientalisms) Kiš is echoing the sense of isolation and loss with which he associated the Central European cultural space. Kundera and Konrad had written their Central European manifestoes as admonishments against the disappearance of that space, while Kiš, more accurately, considered it as already beyond recuperation. While Kundera and Kiš both pointed to Soviet violence as the blind spot of leftist Western intellectuals, Kiš felt the responsibility, as a Yugoslav from a partly Jewish family, to point to fascism as the first eradicator of Central Europe.

For those reasons, he was fascinated with biographies that resembled his own and demonstrated not just the cultural diversity of Central Europe, but also its destructive potential. It is probably for this reason that he adopted the Habsburg writer Ödön von Horváth as a paradigmatic figure after he first read his works when they became available

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<sup>438</sup> In the last two years of his life, Kiš was complaining about being invited to too many “Central Europe” conferences which he did not feel like attending.

<sup>439</sup> Adam Thirlwell quoting Mark Thompson, “Why We Need Danilo Kiš,” Review of *Birth Certificate* by Mark Thompson. *The Times Literary Supplement*, Oct 9, 2013.

in French in 1970.<sup>440</sup> In a short story pieced together from two versions held in Kiš's literary estate and published posthumously under the title "Apatrid" [based on the French *apatride*] an earlier chapter of Central European history is traced through the map of Horvath's wanderings.<sup>441</sup> An "ethnographic rarity" like Kiš, a self-designation Kiš used in a famous short prose piece called "Birth Certificate," Horváth came from a multiethnic Habsburg background and died unexpectedly in Paris in 1938, after having fled Austria due to the unification with Hitler's Germany.<sup>442</sup> Kiš literary reflections on Horvath, who spoke several languages and considered himself a typical hybrid Habsburg citizen, are a good example for the spiritual kinship that he postulated for Central European writers in his "Variations."

In his short story, "The Stateless One," Kiš offers a barely veiled biographical panorama of Ödön von Horváth's life. Structured in vignettes, short numbered paragraphs, of which each transmits an anecdote with a deeper political meaning, the story follows the origins, but also the final days of the Habsburg-bred writer Egon von Nemeth. The protagonist's last name means "the German" in Hungarian, just as Horvath translates into "the Croatian," thereby adding to the multiethnic identity confusion, which causes his demise. Ödön von Horváth was born in Fiume/Rijeka, now Croatia, which was at that time the largest sea port of the Habsburg Empire, and he Magyarized his originally German first name Edmund into the Hungarian Ödön. Bilingual in German and

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<sup>440</sup> Danilo Kiš, "Notes to the Original Edition –The Stateless One," in *The Lute and the Scars*, trans. John K. Cox (Champaign, Ill.: Dalkey Archivc Press, 2012), 115.

<sup>441</sup> The publisher of the English edition chose the title, "The Stateless One," which Kiš identified as an alternate in his drafts.

<sup>442</sup> Danilo Kiš, "Birth Certificate," in *Homo Poeticus*, 3.

Hungarian, he spent his youth in Belgrade, Budapest, Bratislava and Vienna before attending university in Munich.

Formally, several perspectives are oscillating in the story: through free indirect discourse the focus is alternatively on Nemeth (through the third person), and a more removed, but not omniscient narrator following his fate. Then there is the insertion of italicized, documentary-style sentences that denote time and place of certain events and give the impression of factual legitimation. We are to believe that what is narrated is not merely fiction, it has been noted down by an impartial historical observer. There are also two parallel time-lines: the present time of the narrative is set during Nemeth's stay in Paris in late May and early June of 1938, but it is interspersed with non-chronological memories, from early childhood to recent events. The opening quotation of the story, "*He arrived in Paris on May 28, 1938*"<sup>443</sup> also foreshadows its ending, von Nemeth's tragic death only three days later: Horváth was killed by a falling branch during a storm in Paris on June 1, 1938. The first five vignettes deal with Nemeth's impressions in his Paris hotel room – he is haunted by the ghosts of former inhabitants of his quarter, an unnamed poet and his mistress. The editor's notes to the story identify this poet with the Hungarian author Endre Ady, whom Kiš had admired and translated, and who had also lived in Paris for longer periods of time. "The Stateless One" also references Kiš's travelogue "Trip to Paris" from 1959, his first visit to the city that would become his exile home, and which reverberates with hope and romanticism. It includes a translation from the Hungarian of one of Ady's enthusiastic letters from Paris, a love declaration with which the young Kiš deeply identified: "Oh Paris, you are the enamored restlessness

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<sup>443</sup> Kiš, "The Stateless One," 3.

of my soul, and I feel so much life in you, absurd, futile, sad, beautiful life.”<sup>444</sup> As a response to this, Kiš writes: “Thanks to him [Ady], I came to Paris not as a stranger but rather as someone who goes on a pilgrimage to the intimate regions of his own dream, to some kind of Terra Nostalgiae.”<sup>445</sup> The nostalgic enchantment of his early visits has turned to morbid melancholy in the experience of his alter ego Egon von Nemeth.

Having arrived in Paris, Nemeth is not only haunted by ghosts of previous guests in his hotel room, but also develops a phobia of elevators: during his last visit to his Berlin, the elevator in his former publisher’s building reminded him of a coffin, indicating not just the failed publishing attempt of his last novel, (*The Man Without A Country*) but pointing to the end of his life. Nemeth’s writing is described as being split into impressionistic short pieces, just like the format of Kiš’s story: “He captured in haste a few observations, a few *Bilder*.”<sup>446</sup> Detailed descriptions of settings that leave the impression of literary “photographs” are a common stylistic device of Kiš’s. The image, as Kiš has explained in an interview, speaks for the subject of trauma and historical turmoil when coherent narratives fail.<sup>447</sup> Here, the “images” created by Nemeth are a means to come to terms with an unsettling reality, but, as will become apparent, they are also part of the writer’s legacy. Similarly, memory is accessed through a series of images – in the novel *Hourglass*, the narrator compares his style of storytelling to a game of

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<sup>444</sup> Danilo Kiš, “Izlet u Pariz,” *Varia*, 527.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, 532.

<sup>446</sup> “The Stateless One,” 6.

<sup>447</sup> See Kiš, “Life, Literature,” *Homo Poeticus*, 316-317, where he recounts a traumatic childhood memory from the Novi Sad massacre. I will return to this excerpt when discussing his *Family Circus*. See also Tatjana Petzer in Angela Richter, 2001 “Geschichte in Bildern,” 47.

solitaire with picture postcards: "I will gather all these picture postcards in a pile [...] I will shuffle my cards and then lay them out in a game of solitaire for those readers who like solitaire and inebriation, flashing colors and vertigo."<sup>448</sup>

The arranging of pictures is a meditative exercise, but also as a game of cards that evokes intense emotional reaction, even overwhelm ("inebriation," "vertigo") because the configurations of meaning it produces cannot be fully grasped by the shuffler. The "pictures postcards" Kiš refers to are in fact photographs from the family album, as we will later see. This explains their role as facilitators of memory and narrative. As Marianne Hirsch has pointed out in her work on family photographs: "When we look at photographic images from a lost past world, especially one that has been annihilated by force, we look not only for information and confirmation but for an intimate material and affective connection that would transmit the affective quality of the events." The observer of the photograph expects to be unsettled, touched by it, and simultaneously invests it with his own fears and hopes.<sup>449</sup>

Even though the family picture is the most evocative visual text in Kiš's writing, different types of verbal "picture postcards" are alternated – there is the photographic snapshot of a childhood street view or a school building, and sometimes a still-life or painting capturing different actions. Pictures maintain a dynamic, reciprocal relationship in Kiš's prose: often it appears as if a memory has solidified into a picture, and a picture, particularly a photograph may evoke a string of memories. The "Bilder" or impressions

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<sup>448</sup> On writing as a game of solitaire see Richter and Petzer, *Entgrenzte Repräsentationen*, 13; 49.

<sup>449</sup> Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory. Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 38.

Nemeth jots down towards the end of his life are of a different nature – they do not relate to his own family history but are meant to capture more abstract, troubling aspects of humanity. They reflect his recent obsession with human cruelty and deformity, which corresponds to the aberrations he sees in society: “Giants, dwarfs, boxing champions and circus freaks triggered in him a whole chain of metaphysical associations.” The morbid atmosphere and alienation in these images speaks to the fact that Nemeth is a misfit and aberration to his erstwhile community. Once revered by his readers as the promoter of “the national spirit,” he has now fallen from grace due to his rejection of one unified collective or ideal:

[...] sworn enemies [...] considered him a traitor to national ideas, a sell-out to the Germans and the Jews, the nobles and the moneyed classes, and these enemies denied that he had any originality, proclaiming him an ordinary imitator of the French symbolists, a plagiarist of Verlaine and Baudelaire, and they wrote pamphlets about him full of accusations and every manner of slander.”<sup>450</sup>

All the allegations that are cited in this paragraph have in fact been raised against Kiš himself. When Kiš first published his novel *A Tomb for Boris Davidovich* (*Grobница za Borisa Davidoviča*) in 1976, a major literary scandal erupted, which eventually brought about his permanent emigration to Paris.<sup>451</sup> The book, actually a collection of different short stories but still bearing the designation of a “novel,” exposes Stalinism as the other major totalitarian terror regime next to fascism. Following the traces of mostly Jewish revolutionaries who fell prey to the Stalinist purges across Europe, Kiš was touching upon two taboos – writing about explicitly Jewish characters in a latently anti-Semitic Yugoslav public climate, and daring to overtly reject Stalinism. Instead of naming these

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<sup>450</sup> Kiš, “The Stateless One,” 7.

<sup>451</sup> Kiš kept visiting the former Yugoslavia until his death in 1989, as related through numerous anecdotes in Thompspon’s *Birth Certificate*.



political issues outright, Kiš's major critics such as Golubović and Miodrag Bulatović attacked him on the literary level by accusing him of plagiarism (mainly of Borges and Bruno Schulz) and denigrating his talent as a writer. In spite of Tito's early break with Stalin in 1948, the Communist Party of Yugoslavia continued to be strongly influenced by Stalinism - a critique of Stalinism, even though officially condoned, was therefore often read as a covert critique of Yugoslav socialism and naturally struck the ardent Titoists among the literary critics like a slap in the face.<sup>452</sup> Even Kiš's supporters recognized it as an attack on the Yugoslav status quo. The Croatian Jewish historian Ivo Goldstein elaborated: "In the 1960s and 1970s, [...] if you wanted to criticize the Yugoslav system, you had to do it under the cover of criticizing Stalinism and the Soviet Union. Boris Davidovich was an example of this par excellence. [...]"<sup>453</sup> Kiš responded with a sharp, detailed demontage of the arguments brought out against him in a collection of essays published as *The Anatomy Lesson* (*Čas anatomije*, 1978). The explicit characterization of his opponents in the book led to a defamation trial, during which Kiš defended himself without a lawyer by forcefully debunking his accusers' racism and provincial mindset.<sup>454</sup> In 1979, the charges were dismissed, and Kiš left the court as a free man. After that he settled in Paris permanently, with only brief visits to the former homeland. Though he had already spent long periods of time in France before, this confrontation marks the final disillusionment with the Yugoslav political and literary establishment, and cemented his status as an exile.

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<sup>452</sup> Thompson, *Birth Certificate*, 235.

<sup>453</sup> Goldstein as quoted in Thompson, *Birth Certificate*, 238.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, 277 – 278.

Just as with “the stateless one,” the failure to fit into one collective mold (be it national, ethnic or political) seems to originate in a family history of continued displacement, intercultural crossings which resulted in the lack of a clear sense of belonging. Outward recognition does not prove very helpful or turns out instable at best: In his native country, Egon von Nemeth is said to have “a monument, and streets named after him; he had generations of admirers and his own mythos<sup>455</sup>”, but all these accomplishments do not deter his slanderers or his admirers of using him as a projection screen for their own nationalist ideas. The only possible reaction for the “stateless” author is to embrace his hybridity and the antagonisms that come with it. Born in the coastal town of Rijeka/Fiume, Nemeth learned this lesson from the weathered Kvarner landscape:

[...] he would retain for the whole of his life the memory of the sea and of a palm tree in front of his window, straining beneath the hammering of a gale, as an illustration of a Spartan proverb that was near and dear to his father’s heart: the power of resistance is acquired through constant struggle against the elements.<sup>456</sup>

The memory of his early years in Fiume triggers a wave of additional memories, this time not of places but rather people, the members of his extended family. Kiš now transcribes as series of photographs that Nemeth conjures up in his mind, which trace the various branches of his Central European family and, though related to the written pictures (“Bilder”) above, display different sensibilities. They are actual, personal documents, not an impression gained through observation, the narrator is not the photographer or the painter, but instead an investigator of a fleeting relic. This is the tension between object and observer already inherent in family photographs, created by a complex dynamics of

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<sup>455</sup> Kiš, “The Stateless One,” 7.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

myths, desires and fears.<sup>457</sup> His examination betrays his need to understand the object at hand, but since the document in front of him is passed down and contextualized through a family collective (parents, grandparents, other relatives) that participates in the creation of family myths, the search for truth becomes much more complicated. The first of these photographs shows his maternal great-grandfather, supposedly a marker and proof of family shame. It is an image that simultaneously evokes pride and discomfort:

His great-grandfather on his mother's side (mutton chops, stove-pipe hat clutched in his left arm, his right resting at the elbow on a high shelf; on the shelf, in a vase, paper roses, at his feet a faience figure of a tremendous mastiff) was named Feldner. [...] It was with a certain feeling of guilt that they referred to him as "the late Feldner" (using his last name and always with the addition of "late"). That some ancient wrongdoing had come down from him, some type of original sin – this was beyond certain. Hence the sparse documentation of him, hence the sole photograph in the album.<sup>458</sup>

The "original sin," of course, lies in his Jewish origins, and Kiš is echoing Kafka's verdict of Jewishness as a "family calamity," which he had quoted earlier in his "Variations."<sup>459</sup> Kiš' incorporation of imagery is peculiar here: instead of inserting the real life photograph in question, he delivers a "prose picture" or "imagetext" which creates the narrative equivalent of a picture.<sup>460</sup> The described photograph elicits a

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<sup>457</sup> See Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996): "The familial gaze situates human subjects in the ideology, the mythology, of the family as institution and projects a screen of familial myths between the camera and subject. [...] A familial look is thus an engagement in a particular form of relationship, mutually constitutive, mediated by the familial gaze, but exceeding it through its subjective contingency," 11.

<sup>458</sup> Kiš, "The Stateless One," 8-9.

<sup>459</sup> Kiš, "Variations," 109.

<sup>460</sup> Marianne Hirsch expands on W.J.T. Mitchell's concept of the "imagetext" that aims to describe relations between the visual and the verbal: "It is my argument [...] that all family photographs are composite, heterogenous media, "imagetexts": visual texts, that is whose

different response from the reader than it would have been the case with a prosaic anecdote involving the great-grandfather.<sup>461</sup> The [narrated] photograph, however, does not make for a more cogent narration: Even though the photograph is positioned as an intermediary between reader and narrator, it appears equally puzzling to both. Nemeth did not know his great-grandfather, but the family myth of his origins affects him to this day, like an inherited punishment he cannot escape. The stylized pose and props involved in the photograph point to the fact that it is a staged studio picture, and its formality further defies access to the curious great-grand son Nemeth. As such, the photograph simultaneously reveals and conceals the clue for his own identity that Nemeth is looking for – being the last of its kind, it highlights the almost extinguished Jewish element in the family. But it also points to the larger Jewish habitat of the Habsburg Empire: by reproducing photographic details of hair style, clothing, body posture, and furnishings, Kiš is evoking a Biedermeier atmosphere of sophistication and domesticity that would have been typical for many middle-class Habsburg families, especially newly assimilated Jews. A few decades later, their children and grandchildren would become diplomats, artists and writers who moved among the urban intellectual circles of the dual monarchy.

The next two pictures show the writer's father Aladar von Nemeth "accompanied by Lajos Hatvany, (who corresponded with T. Mann and Romain Rolland)" and mother ("a

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readings are narrative and contextual but which also, in some ways, resist and circumvent narration." Hirsch, *Family Frames*, 271.

<sup>461</sup> Kiš does indeed insert pictures in *Hourglass*, a black and white pictogram of an hourglass that doubles as two heads facing each other, and there is a drawing of his mother's Singer machine in *Garden, Ashes*. Also, most editions of the *Family Circus* contain photographs of Kiš and his family.

cheerful face under a crown of blonde hair pinned up in plaits”) – a company in which they might have well made the acquaintance of someone like Stefan Zweig, who, like Horvath, was a believer in the Europe of the arts. Mobile in a Habsburg sense, the family is then pictured in different cities, Belgrade in 1905, Budapest 1913, and finally the boy with his classmates at the “Wilhelmsgymnasium, Munich” in 1914. The configuration of photographs in the family album, the mix of ethnicities and frequent exchange of residences suggests a typical Habsburg bourgeois lifestyle and life story. Horvath’s famous self-identification as “alt-österreichisch-ungarische *Mischung*” is assigned to Nemeth; the original quote, stemming from an interview that Horvath gave in 1934, as Kiš explains, is inserted into the story under paragraph 14, in a pastiche style that is typical for Kiš’s prose and even more pronounced in this short stories.<sup>462</sup> But the family album is also a configuration of fragmented memories, of people and places that have ceased to exist, at least as captured in these photographs – the lost world of Habsburg Jewry before 1918. And yet this older album is part of the overall album that makes up Kiš’s story, which is itself a network of imagetexts, anecdotes, quotes and their corresponding contextualization. Just as with the “Variations,” these prose vignettes are made up of contradicting and dialectical elements: the personal anecdote is used to make a general moral point, the importance of individual story and biographical detail over History is highlighted by the narrator while it is suppressed by the protagonist. The pluralistic format of the album, as opposed to the classical structure of the novel, serves the purpose of preserving the past more effectively due to its openness, the gaps it

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<sup>462</sup> Kiš, “The Stateless One,” 12.

displays, the selection process that is only partially explained. It performs the feat of coherence, while at the same time emphasizing the disjointed elements involved in it.<sup>463</sup>

The album Nemeth revisits does not offer a resolution for the conflicted concept of ancestry. Nemeth's/Horvath's identity as a writer is based on his complex family tree, and yet ancestry as a defining element is eliminated from their own writing as a rejection of budding racial theories of exclusion:

In that period when the Bildungsroman was in full flower in European literature and writers were basing their work on the social origins of the protagonist [...] Egon von Nemeth consciously did away with the biographical elements of his work. He considered the question of his parents and his origins to be a triviality and accident of fate, even while intuiting with great foresight that in the theory of social origins there were signs of a new and dangerous theology of original sin, in the face of which the individual was helpless, marked for all time, marked with the stamp of sin on his brow as if put there by a red-hot brand.<sup>464</sup>

Already sensing that he would not be able to escape the nationalist pressure for identifying his allegiance, Horvath had declared in the 1934 interview: "I am, good Sirs, a German writer; the world is my homeland."<sup>465</sup> The world becomes Horvath's/Nemeth's homeland because Europe, in its nationalist and racist frenzy, has betrayed its humanist promise. When Nemeth travels to Amsterdam shortly before his death, he is working on a novel entitled *Farewell to Europe*. He arrives there via Italy, Hungary and Yugoslavia, "in order to absorb the European climate so that he would have some fresh and reliable

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<sup>463</sup> See Annegret Pelz and Anke Kramer, introduction to *Album. Organisationsform narrativer Koheränz* (Göttingen, Wallstein Verlag 2013), 7-13.

<sup>464</sup> Kiš, "The Stateless One," 11-12.

<sup>465</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

material.”<sup>466</sup> The “European climate,” it turns out, is a disastrous one. Amsterdam is depicted as the last European idyll that remains untouched by the recent calamities:

If it hadn't been for the papers [...] and their talk of armaments, of the dizzying increases in prices and unemployment, of diplomatic negotiations and anxious urgency, one could have believed, here in Amsterdam, that one still dwelled in the good old Europe of yore, and that the threat of war, Munich, the Reichstag fire – that they were all just nightmares and apparitions of a sick imagination.[...] <sup>467</sup>

Boats moved calmly along on the canals, on one of them multi-colored laundry hung on the ropes to dry, and someone on deck was playing the harmonica as if trying to imitate a canary [...] Through narrow uncurtained windows families could be seen around tables with dishes of steaming food: bright accents on idyllic scenes of family life, the way they would have appeared on the canvas of a Dutch master. <sup>468</sup>

The Brueghel landscape of Amsterdam with its harmonious, intimate details appears as a contrast to the more disjointed family album described earlier; it is here that Nemeth and his German publisher von der Lange can witness the downfall of German, and consequently European culture as if viewed from an “island” of civilization. A haven for exiled German-speaking writers like Nemeth, it offers them the opportunity to publish their works, after “having been adjudged insufficiently transported by the national spirit or poisoned by the inheritance of their blood.”<sup>469</sup> But it is the same treacherous atmosphere of safety that encourages Nemeth to put his fate in the hands of a German fortuneteller, “Mr. Gottlieb,” who tells him to go to Paris, declaring the city his “last chance.” At first, Nemeth walks into the fortune teller’s office out of “professional curiosity.” He merely intends to jot down another “tableau” of the European canvas (“he

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<sup>466</sup> Ibid.,16.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid.,17.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid.,15.

wanted to have a complete mental inventory of the scene in case he should ever need to evoke it”), but a feeling of disillusionment leads him to ask for a reading.<sup>470</sup> There are a few recurring themes here which also appear elsewhere in Kiš’s oeuvre: the ability to grasp reality and consequently one’s own self completely (to see the whole picture), the element of the supernatural clashing with the documentary, and the concept of fate countering that of free will. Particularly striking are the parallels to the title story of his prose collection *Encyclopedia of the Dead* (1983), in which “The Stateless One” was originally meant to be included.<sup>471</sup> In the story, a female narrator, whose father has recently died of cancer, travels to Sweden in order to research his life, which has been recorded in the “encyclopedia of the dead,” a monumental project created by an secret religious society. This magical encyclopedia contains all human biographies. Held in a secret archive in Copenhagen, it is compared to a Brueghel painting since it contains all the minor details of a person’s life that ordinary historiographers would dismiss:

What makes the encyclopedia unique (apart from its being the only existing copy) is the way it depicts human relationships, encounters, landscapes—the multitude of details that make up a human life. [...] Because it records everything. Everything. The countryside of his native region is rendered so vividly that as I read, or rather flew over the lines and paragraphs, I felt I was in the heart of it: the snow on the distant mountain peaks, the bare trees, the frozen river with children skating past as in a Brueghel landscape.<sup>472</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> Kiš, “The Stateless One,” 18.

<sup>471</sup> see Mirjana Miočinović’s comments on the story, Kiš, *Varia*, 360 -361. The story was included in two earlier tables of content for the collection, albeit under varying titles, “Ödön von Horvath” and “Apatrid/ The Man Without A Country”.

<sup>472</sup> Danilo Kiš, *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 42.



The possibility of an all-encompassing depiction of human reality, its literary documentation is something that fascinated Kiš deeply. Again, he is drawing on literary tropes provided by Borges: the idea of a universal library is contained in Borges short story “Library of Babel,” and the fantasy of absolute memory lies at the heart of “Funes the Memorious,” a man who is gifted with the inhuman skill of remembering everything after being injured in an accident.<sup>473</sup> The Brueghel painting is a metaphor analogous with these, since it combines an omniscient gaze that reaches far into the horizon with the minute detail of daily chores. Every activity is captured by the observer, which stands in contrast to the fact that the humans displayed are often not aware of each other. This makes the gaze encompassing and yet dispassionate.<sup>474</sup> Through the fantasy of a perfect historical record, which is at the same time objective and appreciative of the individual, the story reflects Kiš’s obsession with memory and justice, while at the same time establishing the exploration of the past as the key to restructuring individual identity in the present.<sup>475</sup> In “the Stateless One,” Amsterdam thus becomes a melancholy snapshot, or “tableau” of Europe before the fall from grace during the Second World War. Against the contrast of a “nervous and depressed Europe” the city appears “as if in another world altogether” (16), which could be read as another allusion to Stefan Zweig’s elegiac *World of Yesterday*, which bids farewell to the same socio-cultural era that Nemeth/Horvath grew up in. While Amsterdam appears as an illusory island of neutrality, Paris, as the final destination of exile, becomes an endpoint for both Horvath/Nemeth and Kiš. The

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<sup>473</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, *Ficciones*, trans. Anthony Kerrigan (New York: Grove Press, 1994).

<sup>474</sup> See Denis E. Cosgrove, *Social Formation and Symbolic Landscape* (Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), 147-148.

<sup>475</sup> Aleida Assmann on memory spaces and the archive as quoted in Petzer, *Entgrenzte Repräsentationen*, 48.

same fate as Horvath –sudden death during a storm – awaits Nemeth in Kiš’s story, but it turns into an allegory for the downfall of Central Europe.

Uprooted from his Central European fatherland (in the Serbo-Croatian original, Kiš deliberately uses the word “otadžbina”, fatherland, instead of the more common “domovina”, homeland<sup>476</sup>), the network of ancestral, literary and cultural links that make up his identity, Nemeth is extinguished by the storm of destruction that is preparing to descend upon the continent. Through the manner in which Nemeth’s death is described, Kiš is clearly questioning the presentation of historical events as natural calamity, but also as easily decodable metaphor. The actual accident is not mentioned but needs to be inferred, and the death scene is likened to a violent assassination. It appears as if the nationalist forces Nemeth was running from had managed to catch up with him:

The blow came so fast, so unexpected, that our apatriote couldn’t have felt anything save the penetrating pain on the crown of his head; and all at once daybreak lit up all around him, *as if* a thunderclap had struck in his vicinity; lightning flashed *in his mind*, illuminating with its fearsome and powerful tongue of fire his whole life, and immediately thereafter darkness must have descended. His limbs separated from his body, as if an invisible force had ripped them from his torso.<sup>477</sup>

This paragraph, the second-to-last of the whole story, is both crime scene investigation and metaphysical revelation. And yet it is precisely not a realistic description of events, as personal illumination coincides with the moment of death. Reality is removed by two degrees of estrangement: the narrator’s rational, investigative assumptions about the

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<sup>477</sup> Kiš, “The Stateless One,” 20. Italics mine.

event, and the victim's subjective perception of what is happening to him, in which the natural spectacle appears as illusion, and the experience of supernatural punishment is concrete and real. To understand the weight of the formal argument behind this, it is necessary to examine the previous vignette # 24, which seems peculiar and redundant at first glance:

The stateless one left his hotel at five. In front of the doors to the building he stopped for a moment and looked first up at the sky and then at his watch. "The marquise went out at precisely five o'clock," he said to himself.<sup>478</sup>

Nemeth's conscious effort for orientation in time and space alludes to a literary debate on realism and banality raised by André Breton and Paul Valéry in 1926. Kiš is referring to Valéry's critique of Flaubert for using trite and interchangeable sentences such as "The marquise went out at five o'clock," which produced an artificial veracity that had no place in modern writing. In Valéry's mind, this proved the inferiority of the novel to poetry, the latter of which could go beyond the mundane and express the ineffable.<sup>479</sup> In an essay he wrote in 1960, before he had published any prose, Kiš qualified Valéry's poetic stance on modernity in the following way:

I feel complete respect for the person [Valéry] who abhorred the phrase, "The marquise went out at 5 o'clock," but at the same time I am convinced that there is more art and more life in this phrase than in the mute crunching of sand in which there are no human footsteps and which does not speak in a human voice. As a proponent of the experimental and of suffering, and as someone dedicated to the idea of rebellion against convention, I halt at the borderline of stuttering, even if that means that I have to begin my novel with the sentence, "In the morning, I found human footprints in the sand."<sup>480</sup>

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<sup>478</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>479</sup> See Gabriel Josipovici, *Whatever happened to Modernism?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

In literature, as in history, seemingly redundant details matter. Traces of the past (“human footprints”) rely on specificity to be discovered, they are bound by the “sands” of time and the concrete experience of space. The “borderline of stuttering” is that which cannot be discovered and spoken beyond those traces. In “The Stateless One,” it is the threshold of death, the metaphysical experience itself: “This rapid flash of light, like the flame of a torch before a hard gust of wind extinguishes it once and for all, this illumination prior to complete obscurity – this is as far as we are capable of following the experiences of the man without a country.<sup>481</sup>” We are given a detailed metaphor to approximate the feeling of the experience, but no epistemological relief. And yet, Nemeth’s “footprints” are not erased with his physical death. Most profoundly, Kiš ends the story with a paragraph that captures both the impossibility of permanence, and the continuation of memory. In vignette # 26, we hear Horvath’s disembodied voice as if from the afterlife, where the memory of his cosmopolitan upbringing is slowly fading:

You, dear sirs, would like for me to show you the house in which I was born? But my mother gave birth in the hospital at Fiume, and that building has been destroyed. And you won’t manage to put up a memorial plaque at my house, because it has probably been torn down, too. Alternatively, you’d have to hang three or four plaques with my name on them: in various cities and various countries, but in this I could not be of assistance to you either, because I don’t know in which house I grew up; I no longer recall where I lived during my childhood; I barely even know anymore what language I spoke. What I do remember are images: swaying palms and oleander somewhere by the sea, the Danube flowing along, dark green, next to pastureland, and a counting rhyme: *eeny, meeny, miny, moe....*<sup>482</sup>

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<sup>480</sup> Kiš, *Gorki Talog Iskustva*, 86-87, my translation.

<sup>481</sup> Kiš, “The Stateless One,” 20.

<sup>482</sup> Kiš, “The Stateless One,” 21.

Nemeth refuses the culture of public commemoration, which is always motivated by ulterior nationalist motives, and which leaves no room to acknowledge the complexity of his life. His fragmented Central European biography is accompanied by the eradication of memory spaces, which coincides with his own amnesia. However, as has already been suggested by Kiš in the “Variations,” the literary space of Central Europe takes over the role of cultural repository and mnemonic archive when individuals can no longer do so. Like Kiš’s, Nemeth’s Central Europe is a landscape of ruins, ghosts and artifacts. Notably, in this scenario, Paris has turned from the “Terra Nostalgae” of Kiš’s youth to a place where Central Europeans go to die.

Only touched upon in “The Stateless One,” the subject of exploring family history is crucial for gaining access to the historical space of Central Europe. The first book in Kiš’s family trilogy, *Early Sorrows* (*Rani jadi*, 1970), though set in the same milieu and populated by the same characters, bears some interesting formal distinctions when compared to its two follow-up novels, *Garden, Ashes* (*Bašta, pepeo*, 1965) and *Hourglass* (*Peščanik*, 1972).<sup>483</sup> While the latter two roughly follow the novel format, *Early Sorrows* is structured as a series of a-chronological short prose pieces that can also stand by themselves.<sup>484</sup> It is mostly written from the perspective of Andreas “Andy” Sam, the son of a Jewish family living in Novi Sad just before its fascist takeover in 1941. The

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<sup>483</sup> Though published after *Garden, Ashes*, Kiš identified *Early Sorrows* as the prequel to the latter.

<sup>484</sup> In its epistemological drive for self-recognition according to Lukacs, *Early Sorrows* is certainly novelistic could therefore also be considered the most fragmented novel of the cycle: ‘The novel tells the adventure of interiority; the content of the novel is the story of the soul that goes to find itself, that seeks adventures in order to be proved and tested by them, and, by proving itself, to find its own essence,’ in *Theory of the Novel. A Historical Approach*, ed. Michael McKeon (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 204.

first story, “Chestnut Street,” is Central European memory prose at its best, but this time evoking more the small town world of “Mitteleuropa” through the trope of return to the space of childhood. Unusual for Kiš, it is mainly written as a monologue of a first person narrator who returns to his former hometown looking for his old family home. This retracing of “human footprints” is not only complicated by the unreliability of the returnee’s own memory, but also by the destruction of his childhood environment that has occurred in the meantime. Though the protagonist is not directly identified, different facts in his inquiries suggest that it is the adult Andy Sam. On the search for a street lined with chestnuts, he approaches different people that cross his path. It quickly surfaces that “Chestnut Street” (as it is only called in Andy’s memories) is a vanished place, for the chestnuts cannot be found – they have either been felled or, the street has been renamed after the war. The metaphor of the chestnut tree raises the conflict between individual and collective memory, but the tree-lined avenue also represents a recognizable piece of urban planning in the Habsburg city space.<sup>485</sup> But there might be yet another literary reference hiding underneath the surface of comfortable city life: *Early Sorrows* has been read along other writings that reflect the Holocaust as told through a child’s perspective, the most famous of them being *The Diary of Anne Frank*. The chestnut tree in the backyard of Anne Frank’s hiding place is a prominent topos of hope against the odds, but given the young writer’s also a gloomy reminder of the fate of European Jews:

Nearly every morning I go to the attic to blow the stuffy air out of my lungs, from my favorite spot on the floor I look up at the blue sky and the bare chestnut tree,

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<sup>485</sup> See Sherry Simon on the planned uniformity of the Habsburg city, which included similar architectural features in major buildings such as train stations, secondary schools, banks, city halls etc. Though Simon does not include more residential structures, I believe this is comparable. Sherry Simon, “Habsburg Trieste – Anxiety at the Border,” in *Cities in Translation. Intersections of Language and Memory* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 56-87, 63.

on whose branches little raindrops shine, appearing like silver, and at the seagulls and other birds as they glide on the wind. As long as this exists, I thought, and I may live to see it, this sunshine, the cloudless skies, while this lasts I cannot be unhappy.<sup>486</sup>

Anne Frank's diary had just been translated into Serbo-Croatian in 1969, a year before the publication of *Early Sorrows*, but it is quite possible that Kiš knew it from French or German translations before. Being a gripping and accessible testimony to the resistance against fascism, Anne Frank's diary enjoyed wide popularity in Socialist Yugoslavia and became a classic for the school curriculum just like Kiš's book.<sup>487</sup> Given the common theme, it seems unlikely that he was not familiar with it. But while the chestnut tree offers solace from an atmosphere of incarceration and constant threat to Frank, to Andy the chestnut trees are almost mythological creatures in that their reality is as questionable as his ability to remember. They appear both as ephemeral and the only stable reference to a place that Andy cannot retrieve – later, the returnee will express his frustration at their disappearance through a staunch childhood belief in permanence: “Chestnut trees don't just die like that.”<sup>488</sup> And even though he complains, “memories can't possibly be so misleading,”<sup>489</sup> he seems to gain more certainty the further he explores the space of his youth. In the follow-up novel *Garden Ashes*, the boy Andy confesses to a strange processing of memories:

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<sup>486</sup> Anne Frank, *Anne Frank: The Diary of A Young Girl*, trans. B.M. Mooyaart-Doubleday (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1952), see entry from February 23, 1944.

<sup>487</sup> On the reception of Anne Frank in Socialist Yugoslavia see Dubravka Ugrešić. “Warum weiß mein Neffe nicht, wer Anne Frank war?” in *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, July 27, 2007. An English version was published under the title “Rebranding Footnotes” at [http://thedrawbridge.org.uk/issue\\_8/rebranding\\_the\\_footnotes/](http://thedrawbridge.org.uk/issue_8/rebranding_the_footnotes/).

<sup>488</sup> Danilo Kiš, “Chestnut Street,” 11.

<sup>489</sup> Danilo Kiš, “Chestnut Street,” 15.

Since childhood, I was afflicted with a sick hypersensitivity, and my imagination quickly turned everything into a memory, too quickly: sometimes one day was enough, or an interval of a few hours, or a routine change of place, for an everyday event with a lyrical value that I did not sense at the time, to become suddenly adorned with a radiant echo, the echo ordinarily reserved only for those memories which have been standing for many years in the powerful fixative of lyrical oblivion. In my case, as I said, this process of galvanic overlaying would proceed with a kind of sick intensity as things and persons took on a thin coating of gilt and a noble patina, and yesterday's outing, if some objective circumstance was suggestive of its finality, of the fact that it would not and could not be repeated, would become for me the very next day a cause for melancholic and still indeterminate contemplation. In my case two days were enough to take on the preciousness of a memory.<sup>490</sup>

This anticipation of loss and premature mourning is connected to the mysterious disappearance of Andy's father, which surfaces throughout the trilogy. Kiš's evocation of childhood, especially in the dynamics of the father-son relationship owes a lot to the Polish-Jewish author Bruno Schulz, whom Kiš acknowledged as a major influence on his work.<sup>491</sup> The "galvanic overlaying" described above has appeared in "The Stateless One" and continues throughout the collection of photographs. Though Andy interacts with the current residents of his former neighborhood, it appears that his is a lonely quest: The first people he asks for help have only moved to the area recently, and their perception of the town "after the war" is incompatible with the prewar recollections of a child. A surrealistic, dreamy element is added by the fact that only Andy's questions and answers are recorded, but not those of his conversation partners, making it appear as if he was actually talking to himself. The fragmented, impressionist perspective that shows up in "The Stateless One" applies to this story as well. Like Nemeth, Andy is an exile, only

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<sup>490</sup> Danilo Kiš. *Garden, Ashes*, trans. William J. Hannaher (Normal, IL: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003), 53-54.

<sup>491</sup> On the parallels between Schulz and Kiš see Tanja Hetzer, *Kinderblick auf die Shoah. Formen der Erinnerung bei Ilse Aichinger, Hubert Fichte und Danilo Kiš* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1999), 4-6. Kiš considers Schulz an essential part of the Central European Jewish tradition in literature. See Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, 257.



he has been exiled from the semi-magical world of his childhood. And like Nemeth's, the physical traces of his past have been erased.

Andy's memories are connected to the spaces and buildings that were at the center of his world back then, "the artesian well, school, kindergarten," together with the community which cannot be separated from it. "Early Sorrows" was part of the school curriculum for pre-teenage school children in the former Yugoslavia, as the subtitle "For Children and Sensitive Readers" also suggests. Unlike the other, much longer installments of the trilogy, its short form, simplified language, and evocative imagery made it more suitable for young readers. Again, photographs are used to support the search for identity:

Dear Sir, I can show you a photograph on which we are all pictured together: Miss Fanny, our teacher, and yes, the one sitting next to her is me, Andreas Sam, my sister Ana, Freddie Fuks, the leader of our gang. Yes, excellent, now I remember. That street must have been called Bem Street, for I was a fighter in the Bem gang, whose leader was Freddie Fuks (he went by Aca Dugonja), a Volksdeutscher. Brilliant, Sir, if it hadn't been for our conversation, I would not have remembered that this street was called Bem Street, named after a Polish general, a 1848 veteran. Does this name, perhaps, say anything to you, dear Sir? Bem, Bem Street? Oh yes, I am sorry, of course you cannot remember if you did not live here before the war, but at least you could tell me if there is a street somewhere around here lined with chestnut trees? These chestnuts would bloom in springtime, so that the whole street carried their scent, somewhat melancholy and heavily, except for when it had rained. Then the scent of chestnut blossoms, mixed with ozone, would waft around everywhere.<sup>492</sup>

An elementary school teacher with a possibly Jewish name, a Volksdeutscher or ethnic German as a leader of their group, the commemoration of Habsburg military heroes who defended the monarchy during the revolution of 1848 – all those details indicate the ethnic mixing and layered history of Andy's hometown. The chestnuts, on the other hand,

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<sup>492</sup> Danilo Kiš, "Ulica kestena," in *Rani Jadi* (Belgrade: BIGZ, 1995), 9-10. My translation.

are a sensual and sentimental trigger for Andy's memories, a childhood mythologem that exists side by side with destruction: "Yes, dear Sir, I forgot to tell you that next to the row of chestnuts streets, on the right side, a bomb shelter had been dug out, zig-zag style. This is where our gang used to live."<sup>493</sup> As he continues asking around, he is reprimanded both for the lack of specificity of his 'clues' as well as for his fixation on detail: "Of course, there were bomb shelters everywhere, but I remember quite precisely that there were no chestnut trees except in our street. Of course, these are just details [...]."<sup>494</sup> Andy becomes agitated when another passer-by insists to have found the correct street, even though it is lined with acacias, not chestnuts: "[...] I don't believe that all those chestnuts trees simply disappeared, at least one must have remained here, trees, presumably, have a longer lifetime, chestnuts, dear Sir, don't just die like that."<sup>495</sup> Finally, he is pointed to the house in which he was raised, and oddly enough, he inquires after himself there. This asking for the vanished self and consequently one's own buried past necessitates some narrative distancing and leads to a sudden shift to the third person:

Then he came up to the only door, even though it wasn't *that* door, and rang the bell. Excuse me, he said in a completely normal tone of voice, does Andreas Sam live here? No, no, says the woman, can't you read, Professor Smerdel lives here.

Are you sure, he repeats, that Andreas Sam does not live here? Before the war he did, I know that for sure. Do you perhaps remember his father? Eduard Sam, with glasses. Or perhaps you remember his mother. Marija Sam, tall, beautiful, very quiet. Or his sister, Ana Sam, always with a band in her hair. Look, over there at the place of a field of onions is where their bed used to stand. See, madam, I remember quite well. This is where the sowing machine of his mother, Marija Sam stood. It was a Singer, with a pedal. Oh, don't worry madam, I am just

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<sup>493</sup> Kiš, "Chestnut Street," 10.

<sup>494</sup> The English translation by Michael Henry Heim does not quite capture the indirect speech of the Serbo-Croatian original here, which makes it clear that Andy is repeating what has been said to him. Kiš, "Ulica kestenova," 10.

<sup>495</sup> Kiš, "Chestnut Street," 11.

conjuring up memories, you know, after all these years, everything disappears. See, where I used to sleep there is an apple tree now, and the Singer machine transformed into a bush of roses. But as you can see, no trace of the chestnut trees. It's because, madam, chestnut trees do not have *their own* memories.<sup>496</sup>

Now that the confrontation with the past is imminent, the split between the adult Andy and the child Andy becomes apparent, the sense of inner fragmentation caused by the ruptures of time and space. As previously, Andy resorts to images, maps or photographs stored in his memory for orientation, which leads to an overlapping of different time planes. Through an act of reclaiming, he superimposes the former floor plan of his childhood home that has been torn down or destroyed onto the current house. Significantly, the concrete area he inhabited with his family is now garden space – as if the past had been erased by a natural process and not human intervention. The fact that the name of the occupants, the Smerdels, translates into “the stinkers” as well as the woman’s abrasive reaction, suggest an unlawful takeover or occupation in the literal sense: it conveys Kiš’s criticism of a new elitist strata in Socialist Yugoslavia which supported the cultural amnesia of the postwar republic and willingly or unwillingly contributed to eclipsing the historical displacement of those who had been wronged. The invasion of the past (“conjuring up memories”) is perceived as threatening, for the evocation of memories is not without moral consequences. The takeover is described in organic, rather than political metaphors: a field of onions in place of his parents’ marriage bed, a bush of roses overgrowing his mother’s Singer sowing machine, and an apple tree growing in the same spot where young Andy used to sleep. A family photograph, containing the characteristic features of father, mother and sister, is projected over these

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<sup>496</sup> Kiš, “Ulica Kestenova,” 11-12. My translation and emphasis.

two conflicting spaces, from which only the child Andy is missing. The reader is presented with a “ghost image,” a literary overlapping of two photographic negatives that are irreconcilable, the Sam and the Smerdel residence. What has become of the missing Andy, who seems to exist somewhere between those two takes? Like Nemeth in “The Stateless One,” Andy faces a destiny of extinction. In the next paragraph, the apple tree that has taken his place is described as a “rugged, bent trunk which bears no fruit”<sup>497</sup> – Andy is the last survivor of an old family line. It is his responsibility to retrace a lost world from the scattered parts of his memory. The disappearance of the chestnut trees, which relate to the intimate space of his early years, proves the vulnerability, but also importance of space when it comes to the recovery of the past. Andy’s Chestnut Street is both a mythologeme of Habsburg stability and of the destruction of Jews, a *lieu de mémoire* constructed as a surrogate for the presence of a community that is no more, including the urban geography it once defined. But the memory space needs a witness to unlock the actual memories, which is why the chestnut trees, on their own, are not able to prevail. The last paragraph of the story contains a quote from Andy’s father, Eduard Sam, which expresses the connection between memory and materiality even more strongly. It is a letter written to his sister about the family’s day of departure: “»When the last item left the house – the daybed with the singing springs – the house, dear Olga, fell apart like a house of cards. I don’t know by what miracle I managed to... « (from the letter of my father, Eduard Sam, to his sister Olga Sam-Urfi.)”<sup>498</sup> The house, of course, does not literally collapse, rather this image illustrates the collapse of the family’s former life and

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<sup>497</sup> Kiš, “Ulica Kestenova,” 12.

<sup>498</sup> Kiš, “Ulica Kestenova,” 19.

identity – without its interior furnishings, that are place-holders for the occupants, the idea of home cannot be sustained.<sup>499</sup>

At this point, shortly before the family's escape to Hungary, and two years before Eduard Sam's deportation to Auschwitz, the father's mental disintegration has reached its peak, and the loss of home converges with the loss of self. The mother's precious Singer machine, or the singing daybed (in the original, it is actually an ottoman) are part of an intimate world that almost appears magically animated. Throughout the "Family Circus," lists of objects, names and places surface repeatedly to emphasize that the universe they populate relies on the delicate balance of their totality: nothing is redundant, and the removal of one piece leads to the collapse of the whole habitat. To the returnee, objects from the past can serve as "triggers of remembrance" that "release latent, repressed, or disassociated memories – memories that, metaphorically speaking, remained behind, concealed within the object."<sup>500</sup> But the objects that define Andy's childhood are not really there, he projects them onto the new, estranged space in an effort of reappropriation, which makes them appear only more orphaned, out of place. But he cannot sustain the illusion – the present consumes his imaginative past in front of his own eyes, he cannot stop the transformation of his mother's Singer machine into a bed of roses. "In the face of expulsion and expropriation – especially childhood expulsion –

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<sup>499</sup> It has been argued that the house collapses during the family's escape, however, such an interpretation is only possible if one neglects the father's shaky mental disposition already laid out in *Garden, Ashes*. See Aleksandar Stević, "Intimations of the Holocaust from the Recollections of Early Childhood: Childhood Memories, Holocaust Representation, and the Uses of Nostalgia in Danilo Kiš and Christa Wolf," *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (2014), 443.

<sup>500</sup> Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 212.

home and identity are in themselves implausible and objects remain alienating and strange.”<sup>501</sup>

Since the father’s testimony of disintegration stands at the end of the story, it also coincides with the destruction of Andy’s own images of his childhood. His memories, it turns out, are not first-hand memories, since there is no dynamic action in them, they are static memories of photographs whose context he barely recalls and therefore reconstructs – with poor results. His mental photographs serve as clues for retrieving a nostalgic idea of family cohesion (mother, father, sister all in one picture) he may or may not have experienced as a young child but which is alien to him now.

Central Europe is therefore not just the space of nostalgic reminiscence but also of devastating loss and shattering absence. John Cox maintains that Central Europe as a legacy both of old Austria, but also postwar destruction is countered by other literary spaces that offer the refuge that cannot be found in it. The most central one is the Balkans, which, in the Yugoslav experience also included the Adriatic coast in Montenegro, by which Kiš spent his adolescent years before heading to university in Belgrade.<sup>502</sup> Nowhere is this more apparent than in his short prose piece “A and B,” which juxtaposes, in just a few paragraphs, the beauty and grace found in Kotor, Montenegro (location “A”), to a disheveled hut in the Hungarian countryside, (location “B”) where Kiš’s family sought refuge after fleeing Novi Sad in 1942. “A” is subtitled “the magical place,” because its idyllic harmony generates a metaphysical ecstasy in the visitor, the

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<sup>501</sup> Ibid., 212-213.

<sup>502</sup> John Cox, “Bridge to Nowhere. Danilo Kiš’s “Muddy Tale” and Europe’s Shifting Borders,” *Hungarian Studies* 24 (2010) 2: 267.

equilibrium found in nature leading to equilibrium of spirit. In order to keep the passage from becoming nature-loving sentimentalism, it is written in the tone of a manual, as if giving directions to a tourist who is exploring foreign terrain:

From Kotor, (Kotor is located in the Zeta region of Yugoslavia, on the Gulf of Cattaro, a bay off the Adriatic) you must set out at around 5 in the morning. After an hour of driving up the steep serpentine curves, you have to stop somewhere and wait.

The day must be clear, but there have to be a few white clouds in the west that are reminiscent of a herd of white elephants.

Then you have to let your eyes take in the sea, the mountains, the sky.

And then the sky, the mountains, the sea.

And you have to know for certain that your father traveled this same stretch of road, either on a bus or in a taxi he had hired in Kotor, and you have to be convinced that he beheld this same sight [...].

You also have to take note of those chirping crickets (as if a million wristwatches were being wound up), for they are otherwise so easily forgotten, the same way it's possible not to notice, because of its omnipresence, the smell of sagebrush at the side of the road.

Then the thing is to forget everything else, and to observe from this godlike vantage point the meeting of the elements: air, earth, water.

If all these conditions are met, you will acquire an experience which Koestler called "oceanic feeling."<sup>503</sup>

Different visual regimes overlap here: what Kiš offers the reader is both a map (how to get there) and painting (this is what the scenery will look like when arrived). In particular the invitation to look in a specific way evokes the impression of a set "picture" – landscapes do not usually show up in photographs in Kiš's writing, the staged photograph is limited to family portraits, the photographic snapshot of the quotidian: memorable childhood moments and familiar buildings. Indeed, the scenery in location "A" seems to be too ontologically vast, too sublime to be taken in by the camera.

Poetic and instructive elements alternate: the geographical data of the origin and the time for departure are precise, but the driving instructions are vague, "up the steep

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<sup>503</sup> Danilo Kiš, "A and B," in *The Lute and the Scars*, 94-95.

serpentine curves” until one finds clouds resembling “a herd of white elephants.” The trinity of sky, mountains and sea has to be “taken in,” ritualistically, in a certain order, which is then reversed to make the picture complete. But on the other hand, the search for “the magical place” is also bound to personal (or anecdotal) memory, the son following the footsteps of his father; it cannot be pursued by just anyone. A doubling of memories and images is in fact occurring, since the narrator is accessing both his own memory of the trip, and vicariously reliving his father’s memory from a few decades ago. The state of utopia, or spatial bliss, that this merging causes, however, also requires selective remembering or attention (directed at the scents and sounds of the Adriatic coastline) which includes an active “forgetting” of the concrete space, in order to arrive at a sublime space evoked through the mystical union of the elements. It is through an initial immersion, then a zooming out of concrete space that a larger than life perspective is achieved, summed up in Arthur Koestler’s and Sigmund Freud’s “oceanic feeling.” Interestingly, Kiš allots the term first to Koestler – Freud is mentioned only later, in an epigraph following the main text. What is referenced here is Koestler’s suicide note from June 1982, in which the disease-stricken former Habsburg author had cited his hope of attaining the “oceanic feeling” as the prime motivation for taking his own life.<sup>504</sup> The relationship between the “oceanic feeling” and death is further foregrounded in the “PS” note of “A,” where it attains a personal dimension:<sup>505</sup> “My father viewed this same scene in 1939 (five years before he disappeared at Auschwitz) and in 1898 so did Mr. Sigmund

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<sup>504</sup> The complete suicide note by Koestler and his wife is quoted in English in George Mikes, *Arthur Koestler – the Story of a Friendship* (London: Deutsch, 1983), 78-79.

<sup>505</sup> Koestler reverses Freud’s notion of oceanic feeling, which is tied to birth and life, not death. See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: J. Cape & H. Smith, 1930), 64ff.



Freud, who went on to have his famous dream about the three Fates.”<sup>506</sup> The lineage of Central European Jewry (Freud-Koestler-Eduard Kiš), which ultimately ends in destruction, is linked here to the Mediterranean legacy of metaphysical revelation. It is through Kiš’s layering of different images and texts, from the official map to the private image/painting and passed down memory that the final ‘zoom out’ to the larger pattern of Mitteleuropa history and poetics emerges.

In a speech given at a 1980 literary convention, Dialogue méditerranéen in St. Maximin, Kiš had espoused the Mediterranean as a buffering space between the Cold War powers, in the same way that he would later promote Central Europe.<sup>507</sup> In a deliberately provocative streak of essentialism, he confirms the notion of the Mediterranean as the “cradle of culture,” aiming it against Soviet appropriations of this space, which he considers as equally, if not more disconcerting than the “Atlanticist” (meaning American-capitalist) colonization decried by Western leftist intellectuals. But more importantly, he expands the classicist definition of the Mediterranean by including both ancient and modern Jewish civilization in it:

[...] an important Mediterranean culture, one of the oldest, the culture of the Hebrews (from the vestiges of whose alphabet and literature the literature of Israel was born) received one of its most destructive blows not from Atlanticism or Atlantic hegemony but from the Soviet Union, which during the thirties and forties (or, to be more precise, between 1937 and 1952) liquidated *all* Hebrew and Yiddish writers and with them the rich Hebrew and Yiddish literary tradition.<sup>508</sup>

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<sup>506</sup> Kiš, “A and B,” 95.

<sup>507</sup> Danilo Kiš, “Mediterran i zlatno runo,” in *Homo Poeticus* (Sarajevo: Svjetlost, 1990), 167-172, translated as “The Mediterranean and the Golden Fleece,” in Danilo Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1995), 115-120.

<sup>508</sup> Kiš, *Homo Poeticus* 1995, 118-119.

As a parallelism to this oppression, and completing the circle that connects the Mediterranean to Central Europe, Kiš ends his speech by citing Kundera's outrage at the destruction of Czech culture by Soviet occupation. Kiš emphasized repeatedly that the Central European space, and with it its Jewry, has been held hostage by two totalitarian ideologies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – fascism and communism. He perceived the “ideological pollution” of those systems as far more threatening than the hegemony of capitalism, symbolized by a Coca-Cola bottle floating in the ocean. The ideological purists, he claimed, identified the bottle as a threat, “while ignoring the real mine below the surface.”<sup>509</sup> The Mediterranean, or pars pro toto the Adriatic, appears as a dreamy, but only temporary arcadia in several of Kiš's stories. Like Central Europe, Kiš conceives of the Mediterranean as both a historical region and a concept defined by a plethora of imaginaries. But even though it is similarly transnational and not strictly defined geographically, it does not carry the weight of historical trauma as Central Europe does. Instead, it serves as a true escapist landscape, a contrastive arcadia.<sup>510</sup> In “The Stateless One,” it shows up by means of the Kvarner landscape, and in “A Story Which Will Make You Blush” from *Early Sorrows*, in which Andy imagines himself as an adventurous sailor during an intermission in school (“A night at sea near the coral reefs.”)<sup>511</sup> The boy's Mediterranean fantasy is interrupted by his friend, who wants to use the bathroom before class resumes. Then, in a typical episode of childhood terror, Andy realizes that he

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<sup>509</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>510</sup> On the discussion of the Mediterranean as a cultural space, see Predrag Matvejevic, *Mediterranski brevijar* (Zagreb: Grafički zavod Hrvatske, 1989). Translated by Michael Henry Heim as *The Mediterraneanen. A Cultural Landscape* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>511</sup> Kiš, *Early Sorrows*, 33.

is caught in a dream within a dream, not just the tropical night by the sea, but also the afternoon in school are illusions, and he has wet the bed.<sup>512</sup> The moment of waking up and of frightful realization is followed by another bleak impression of domestic life in wartime Central Europe: “A dirty autumn dawn, humid and sullen, enters the room. [...] I can picture myself running barefoot to school, going into the classroom all wet and frozen and taking a seat near the stove, silent, full of myself from the pity provoked by my wet feet and bare rags.”<sup>513</sup> The home, which is already missing the father figure here, has been divested of all comfort and safety, instead it is the school building, and the powers of the imagination fostered there, which offer some limited respite.

Location “B,” then, which is subtitled “the worst rathole I visited?,” exemplifies this history of misery in 20<sup>th</sup> century Central Europe even more strongly. It is a place of refuge and yet the very opposite of a haven, the direct result of displacement and persecution, as well as the poverty and isolation that come with it:

The house is made of dried mud, the room of darkened tiles that have shattered or slipped in places. The door is small, so that a grown person can only enter by bending at the waist. [...] In the larger room there are two wooden bed frames and two chests of drawers that are pulled out twenty to thirty centimeters from the wall. A rag carpet is stretched diagonally across the floor from the entranceway to the kitchen. In a corner of the kitchen stands a stove made of sheet metal. Two or three pots hang on heavy nails, and a wooden trunk serves as a sleeping platform and a pantry. Next to the stove lies a pile of decaying wet spruce cones for heating. There is thick smoke in the kitchen, so thick that the people who sit on the chest

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<sup>512</sup> Kiš, *Early Sorrows*, 33.

<sup>513</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

or on the short wooden stools can barely see. Their voices work their way through smoke as through water.<sup>514</sup>

While location “A” is almost devoid of mundane human reality, location “B” is an inventory of survival, a gritty testimony to the bare necessities of physical existence: sleep, food, shelter from the weather. Just as location “A,” it is a space of memory that is being revisited, and as such reconstructed in the mind. The voices speaking through the smoke and the humans cramped in the Hungarian mud hut are echoes from the past, as a dialogue at the end of the vignette reveals:

“Here was the alarm clock. On this nail,” I say to the man who brought me here in a car from Budapest. “A drunken Russian sailor took it in 1945.”

“Someday there will be a plaque here,” the man noted ironically as we were leaving the house. “It will say: HERE LIVED THE YUGOSLAV WRITER DANILO KIŠ FROM 1942 TO 1945.”

Within this short exchange, a whole reference map of exile, war, poverty, and liberation is opened up. Again, single items acquire existential symbolic weight: The alarm clock as one of the few precious remainders of a former bourgeois life, the nail to which it is attached as its crude counterpart of deprivation, and both as metaphors for the passage of time. Budapest appears as the starting point from which the past can be explored, precisely because of its twofold history of occupation – first fascist, then communist. In the middle of these constellations we have the child Danilo Kiš, certainly far from being the “Yugoslav Writer” referred to above. We are reminded of the memorial plaque that Egon von Nemeth refused both on ideological and historical grounds. Location “B” is a memory place, though certainly not of the glamorous kind that cultural emissaries would look for. Although it is presented merely as a site of desolation, not of atrocity, it can be

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<sup>514</sup> Kiš, “A and B,” 96-97.

considered part of the map of ideological persecution, which is included in *A Tomb For Boris Davidovich*, and stretches from eastern Russia, across Central Europe to the Mediterranean.<sup>515</sup> This map features ninety-seven cities and regions that appear in the thematically linked story collection, from Agen in France to Galicia in Poland, to Voronezh in Soviet Russia. The same dialectical tangent of Central Europe is present in “A and B”. The legacy of a European classicist tradition collides with the sites produced by totalitarian systems, all in all ruins of culture and history. And yet they cannot exist apart, as the “PS” to location “B” suggests: “Texts A and B are connected to each other by mysterious bonds.”<sup>516</sup>

In many ways, *A Tomb For Boris Davidovich* illustrates the destruction of Central Europe as a common legacy, and specifically the failure of the Habsburg ideal of unity. Consider this spatial vignette taken from the story “The Magic Card Dealing,” subtitled “Pictures from the Album,” pointing once more to the relationship between family history and cultural space. What album is Kiš referring to? It is a family album that also doubles as an encyclopedia, since it includes the totality of Central European biographies and experiences, of private moments that are tied to crucial historical developments. The picture Kiš chooses demonstrates the clash of two forces in the region, the Habsburg monarchy with its stagnant political processes, and the rising vigor of communism, tied to the long-time geographical opponent, Russia.

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<sup>515</sup> Danilo Kiš, *A Tomb For Boris Davidovich*, trans. Duška Mikić-Mitchell (McLean, Ill.: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011)

<sup>516</sup> Kiš, “A and B,” 97.

The story describes the rise and fall of the Hungarian-Jewish communist Karl Taube, who is murdered by Stalinist functionaries after just being released out of seventeen years in Soviet prison camps. The vignette in question depicts Taube's Central European origins in a dismal, non-sentimental manner, certainly quite differently from Andy Sam's semi-mythical "Chestnut Street:"

Karl Georgievich Taube was born in 1899 in Esztergom, Hungary. Despite the meager data covering his earliest years, the provincial bleakness of the Middle European towns at the turn of the century emerges clearly from the depths of time: the grey, one-story houses with back yards that the sun in its slow journey divides with a clear line of demarcation into quarters of murderous light and damp, moldy shade resembling darkness; the rows of black locust trees which at the beginning of spring exude, like thick cough syrups and cough drops, the musky smell of childhood diseases; the cold, baroque gleam of the pharmacy where the Gothic of the white porcelain vessels glitters; the gloomy high school with the paved yard (green, peeling benches, broken swings resembling gallows, and whitewashed wooden outhouses); the municipal building painted Maria-Theresa yellow, the color of the dead leaves and autumn roses from ballads played at dusk by the gypsy band in the open-air restaurant of the Grand Hotel.<sup>517</sup>

This passage is an excellent example for Kiš's poetics of enumeration, which has been read as a counter-strategy to totalizing world-views and the positivistic attitudes they reveal.<sup>518</sup> The listing of images here, rather than just mere objects in a collection, creates the impression of a complex collage in which a bureaucratic, official tone (which speaks of "meager data") meets sensually saturated, romantic melancholy. The "pictures" in this case that are transcribed by an investigative narrator are snapshots of Central Europe as if seen through dark glasses, and as such they are much more than documents to be examined, they come closer to the memories that enchant or disturb like Andy's mental pictures in

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<sup>517</sup> Kiš, *A Tomb For Boris Davidovich*, 56.

<sup>518</sup> Katherine Holt. "Enlisting Words against Words. Danilos Kiš's Enumeration." *Serbian Studies: Journal of the North American Society for Serbian Studies*, Volume 22, No 1, 2008.

*Early Sorrows*. In an inverse nostalgia, they offer an almost dystopian mirror image of “Chestnut street:” uniform houses, sickening locust trees, a dilapidated school building, set in a hostile climate of extremes and false appearances (“murderous light and dark, moldy shade resembling darkness”). Everything about this panorama spells decay and prevents individual growth. Not surprisingly, the young Karl is disdainful of his own roots, and dreams “[...] about that happy day, when, through the thick lenses of his glasses, he would see his town from the bird’s eye view of departure and for the last time, as one looks through a magnifying glass at dried-out and absurd yellow butterflies from one’s school collection: with sadness and disgust.”<sup>519</sup> To the budding revolutionary Taube, the Habsburg provinces merely signify the decadence of a failed system – once he has waved goodbye to his father from the train, he leaves his first class seat to mingle with the workers in the third class compartment. Through this melancholy, morbid panorama of Central European life at the height of the dual monarchy, Kiš is referencing one of his literary mentors – the passionate Habsburg critic Miroslav Krleža. Along with other Croatian writers at the turn of the century, Krleža paints the Habsburg periphery as a space of stagnation and narrow-mindedness, from which the main protagonists flee to achieve happiness in the center, be it Vienna, Budapest or Paris, but eventually return, unable to withstand the destructive pull of the peripheral homeland.<sup>520</sup> Central Europe as viewed through dark glasses forms a stark contrast to the settings in Kiš’s family trilogy, particularly *Early Sorrows* and *Garden, Ashes*. A lyrical excerpt from an interview given

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<sup>519</sup> Ibid..

<sup>520</sup> See Dubravka Ugrešić, “The Spirit of the Kakanien Province,” in *After Yugoslavia. The Cultural Spaces of a Vanished Land*, ed. Radmila Gorup (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 289-306. Kiš also cites Miroslav Krleža’s rejection of Central European romanticism in his “Variations on Central European Themes,” vignette # 20, 105-106.

by Kiš in 1986, which could have been taken right out of “Chestnut Street,” highlights, above all, his unchanging repository of Central European ‘still life:’

My first sensory impressions of childhood go back to Novi Sad, which is located a hundred or so kilometers south of Subotica, on the Danube. Smells, tastes, colors. The smell of chestnut blossoms, of roses in a vase, of chamomile, machine oil in the sewing machine, my father’s cigarettes, cologne on my mother’s neck, clean sheets, urine, the oilcloth on the table, coffee, soap, spices, the leather sweat band on my father’s hat, cab seats, railway stations, pharmacies, an empty first-class compartment, the strap that opens the compartment window, a leather suitcase. [...] *And images (it’s like leafing through old postcards): the artesian well on the corner, the straw that covered it in winter, a row of chestnuts trees with rustling leaves auguring stormy weather, single-story houses opening on courtyards, low windows decked out with bright red and pale pink geraniums and dusty lawns in front, squeaky delivery carts and cabs floating down the street like gondolas [...].*<sup>521</sup>

The album’s composition here is determined by a different selection process, which can be explained by the different ages of the observer: the pictures shown are generally of a more serene, untroubled nature, since there is a nostalgic impetus for recovering the atmosphere of Kiš’s childhood. With the help of various sensual stimuli and objects, memory becomes embodied as the adult narrator is taking on the perspective of his younger self. But of course it is accompanied with the desires and projections of the adult author, which provide for a different affective coloring. This is why the same single story houses that evoke a suffocating, prison-like atmosphere in the Hungarian province are adorned with flowerpots here, and their courtyards appear expansive, inviting. Still, this paragraph demonstrates a narrative style with carefully weighed contrasts, which Kiš had termed “ironic lyricism:” the scent of flowers has its place in this plethora of sensual impressions just as much as urine, clean sheets are the counterpart to the oilcloth on the table, and the chestnut trees are prevented from becoming too lyrical by means of their

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<sup>521</sup> Kiš, “Life, Literature,” in *Homo Poeticus*, 234-235.



foreboding function. Kiš considers this technique as most apparent in the first book of his family trilogy, *Garden, Ashes*: “I tried to destroy the lyrical spell by putting big pieces of scrap metal, like that sewing machine, into the garden. Or the long list of nouns from a lexicon that should obliterate the perfume of plants in one section.”<sup>522</sup> The repeated invocation of photographic scenes, of preserved memories, is divested of pathos through the contrast with violence and tragedy. Kiš recounts witnessing a pogrom in Novi Sad at the beginning of the “Cold days,” the massacre committed by Hungarian Fascists on the Jewish population:

[...] the photo album idyll came to an abrupt end when I was torn from my sleep one night by a volley of shots fired under our window. My mother turned on a light, but turned it off immediately and took me out of bed in the dark. I knew I wasn't dreaming or having a nightmare: my mother was trembling. The light going on and off and the pitch black under the bed in the dark room – that was the end of the luminous, sunny scenes crowding my memories until then. Suddenly everything was opaque or murky like a roll of film exposed in a dark room. [...] At the time I was completely cut off from time and space: I had no idea what day, what year, what century it was. I was like a trembling puppy. That is why I prefer to speak in images.<sup>523</sup>

What Kiš offers his reader in lieu of the “photo album idyll” that has been terminated by persecution and murder, is an album of contestation, one that reveals the tension between the stylized Habsburg family portrait and the equally prescriptive image of Socialist ‘progressive’ reality. The progressive orientation requires a strict focus on the here and now, discouraging ‘regressions’ and ‘digressions’ into the past. The above metaphor of photographic development captures the complex effects of traumatic events on the memory process, and also leaves clues for their literary excavation process: at the moment of traumatic impact, a state of darkness or shock clouds the perception, making

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<sup>522</sup> Ibid., (252-253), italics mine.

<sup>523</sup> Ibid., 236 -237.

the memories inaccessible for a longer period of time.<sup>524</sup> The traumatic moment blots out distinctions between present, past, and future, like the photograph that is frozen in time, it is always in the now. Thrown back to their primal instincts, its witnesses cannot contextualize it or escape it as it happens – the “trembling puppy” is an affective metaphor for this. But the darkness is also necessary for the development of the photographic images to surface, prying them open with the ‘light’ of conscious effort will have no effect, and worse, may damage them permanently. So a period of gestation, a submersion in forgetting is necessary until they can be accessed. The literary image, to refer back to an earlier quote of Kiš’s, stands at the “threshold of stuttering” exemplified by the quote above, and can therefore speak where cognitive processes fail. Of course it does not exist on its own, it stands in relation to other “picture postcards” that are shuffled around and thus invested with meaning by the narrator: Only through a reconfiguration of the album through imaginative investment can light be shined on that which has been lost.

### **Aleksandar Tišma – Realist Fractures of a Forsaken Central Europe**

Kiš's family photographs, snapshots of memories and encyclopedic paintings are, by and large, relics of filial memory (it is always the son looking for the lost world of the father) which allow postwar reality only to enter the frame from the margins, since there is no direct juxtaposition of the 'now' and 'then.' For the sake of delivering a more complete understanding of the Vojvodina region as a memory space, and the existential dilemmas of Yugoslav Jews living there after the Shoah, it will prove useful to compare him to a fellow writer who, at first glance, has much in common with him and yet offers a rather

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<sup>524</sup> Caruth, *Trauma*, 3-7.

different take on Central European poetics. Aleksandar Tišma, like Kiš, has spoken out against nationalism and for the importance of Yugoslav identity, due to a similar mixed Hungarian-Jewish-Serbian ethnic background.

Aleksandar Tišma's novels demonstrate how the shadow of the past weighs down the seemingly smooth everyday life in socialist Yugoslavia – for there is no 'end of history' for those who are unable to forget. In contrast to Kiš's lyrical vignettes, the permanent exposure to an environment that has witnessed violence leads to an obsession with memory, spurred on by cyclical process retraumatization and disassociation.

While both Tišma and Kiš perceive of the Central European space as the defining influence on their literary ethics, Aleksandar Tišma's aesthetics departs significantly from his younger compatriot Kiš. Their ethical imperative is the same – to uncover the legacy of violence in Mitteleuropa, its deepest imprints being left by the Holocaust, though both authors also include crimes committed in the name of communism, either as retribution for fascist killings, or as the consequence of a new system of oppression. The main difference in the trajectory they envision can be summarized by two Kafka quotes. Kiš's reference to the «strange, mysterious consolation» attributed to literature by Kafka, which enables the «leap beyond the killer's ranks»,<sup>525</sup> betrays a cautious hopefulness for literature as a corrective force that is missing in Tišma. For Tišma, though it never appears in his texts, another well-known statement by Kafka as taken up by Walter Benjamin seems more appropriate: “There is an infinite amount of hope in the world, just

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<sup>525</sup> Kiš, “Variations,” 113. For the original see Franz Kafka, *Gesammelte Werke in zwölf Bänden*, ed. Hans-Gerd Koch Bd. 11, *Tagebücher III: 1914-1923* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994), 210: “Merkwürdiger, geheimnisvoller, vielleicht gefährlicher, vielleicht erlösender Trost des Schreibens; das Hinausspringen aus der Totschlägerreihe Tatbeobachtung.[...]”

not for us.”<sup>526</sup> Not only do Tišma's short stories and novels capture the loneliness and disorientation of the individual after the war, but they also contain explicit graphic details of persecution and murder combined with highly metaphoric, pathos-laden language, something that Kiš considered both stylistically and morally problematic. However, what prevents his writing from turning into the declarative anti-fascist literature officially honed in the early Yugoslavia is the absence of heroes, partisan and otherwise, and the lack of any progressive orientation towards the future. Tišma's often crude representation of violence, along with the fact that it was not accompanied with an easily decodable didactic message startled the Socialist literary critics, who paradoxically struggled to place him between educational realism and a fantastic dystopia.<sup>527</sup> In 1981, the critic Milivoje Marković thus writes:

Tišma, in fact, turned this world [the historical space of Novi Sad and the Vojvodina] into a new reality, a more concrete truth, which he has offered to the reader in the form of experience and as a possibility *for a more certain orientation in life*. [...] there is nothing contrived, everything is taken from life, everything is the pure psychic and historical reality of mankind as conceived and deepened through artistic fervor.<sup>528</sup>

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<sup>526</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka, Zur zehnten Wiederkehr seines Todestages,” in *Benjamin über Kafka*, ed. Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1981), 14. For the original see Kafka as quoted in Max Brod, *Über Kafka* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1976), 71: “Es gibt unendlich viel Hoffnung – nur nicht für uns.”

<sup>527</sup> This is not to say that the graphic description of physical assault is the predominant form in which Tišma relates structures of violence. As Miljenko Jergović has pointed out, *The Book of Blam* contains one of the most moving descriptions of Holocaust violence that have nothing to do with dead bodies: It recounts the reactions of the dogs of Jewish deportees as their owners are being led to the cattle trains. See Miljenko Jergović. “Tišma, utjeha jevrejskih pasa. [Tišma, the consolation of the Jewish dogs] In: <http://www.jergovic.com/subotnja-matineja/Tišma-utjeha-jevrejskih-pasa/>. Last accessed on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2014.

<sup>528</sup> Milivoje Marković, *Prostori Realizma* [The Spaces of Realism] (Subotica: Minerva, 1981), 302. My translation.

Marković's compliment on the motivational force behind Tišma's writing, obliquely put as “a more certain orientation in life” as well as on historical accuracy is relativized soon after, however, when he is faced with the justification of the profound darkness underlying his themes. Terrible historical events such as the Cold Days massacre may have indeed occurred, he seems to imply, but the suffering described by Tišma is so out of proportion that it has to be otherworldly:

Even though it is taken from reality, from the very fiber of history, this world seems somehow supernatural, fantastic, sad, terrible, [...] and very often it announces itself as if it was taken from a fairytale [...] [This world] has something that cannot be grasped, it is full of some blood-stained reality, tumultuous emotions, some sensual inevitability.<sup>529</sup>

Interestingly, it is the physical concreteness of this “blood-stained reality”, along with its affective power that leads Marković to associate it with “fairytales,” which puts it in the proximity of ancient myth. Without stating it explicitly, what appears to cause Marković such discomfort is the doing away of ‘pastness’ that is produced by an evocative piece of literature – implying that too much identification with the victims’ suffering may lead one to forget the good life gained through the partisan liberation struggle and the founding of the Socialist republic. Tišma’s victims, to be sure, were not partisans, and he objected to any instrumentalization of suffering. As early as 1956, Tišma had taken a stance against prescriptive ideological writing, which retained a strong influence on the literary establishment long after socialist-realism had been officially rejected in Yugoslavia. After the Belgrade critic Novak Simic attacked a novel written from the perspective of an Ustasha soldier on the grounds that taking on the viewpoint of the perpetrator implied solidarity with “the monster,” Tišma objected fiercely to such literary

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<sup>529</sup> Ibid., 303.

“ostrich politics,” arguing that evil needed to be mediated through literature to work through the traumas caused by it:

The evil which has accumulated in our times can only be cleaned out with long-term catharses, for which art is the appropriate medium and the artist, *who brings to life and motivates evil within him*, the most appropriate mediator. To stifle evil with silence or black and white declarations –which is the same thing – means covering it up, allowing it to go on existing, killing, while it waits for a moment of darkness in which it might impose itself.<sup>530</sup>

Note that Tišma’s notion of engaged writing calls for a *long-term* process of catharsis through the *embodiment* of evil, which is quite contrastive to the immediate benefits traditionally attributed to a single performance of Greek tragedy.<sup>531</sup> Tišma wrote this at the beginning of his literary career, when both his memory of the Holocaust in Novi Sad and his belief in the possibility of a humanist intervention were still strong. As the decades progressed, and the memory politics of Yugoslavia remained relatively stagnant, even if bolder topics emerged in literature after Tito’s death’s in 1980 (e.g. about the Ustasha regime and the Socialist prison camp Goli Otok), Tišma’s prose became increasingly bleak.

In his collection of short stories, *Return to Peace* [*Povratak miru*], 1977, he presents a world full of people who are transcendently homeless and abandoned, even when they seek out each other’s company: a man eating alone in an empty restaurant, an estranged couple bickering at the breakfast table, gypsies wandering from hotel to hotel

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<sup>530</sup> Aleksandar Tišma, “Ustaški satnik i literatura” [The Ustasha captain and literature], (1956), in: Aleksandar Tišma, *Pre Mita* [Before Myth] (Banja Luka: Glas, 1989), 7. Translation and italics mine.

<sup>531</sup> Aristotle, *Poetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967).

in Prague and constantly being rejected.<sup>532</sup> The stories in *The School of Godlessness* [Škola bezbožništva] (1978) as well as the novels *The Book of Blam* (1972) and *Kapo* (1987) expose the traumatic repercussions of the Second World War and the genocide of the Jews, but above all, they pose the question of how the memory of massacres and displacement, the experience of the camps permeates the postwar experience. It is covered up, repressed and therefore involuntary memory that is at the heart of Tišma's narratives. In contrast to Kiš's *Family Circus*, his protagonists are generally adult witnesses, their trauma is personal and not passed on from parents or other family members. Indeed, instead of the affiliative gesture we find in Kiš's prose, where the child is recurring not just to his own, but also his parents' traumatic memories in the attempt to reconstruct the lost family unit, Tišma's characters are severed from their erstwhile community, often by their own choice.<sup>533</sup> The absence of the community is presented as brutal and glaring like an open wound, and there is no attempt to reassemble it through nostalgic recall. Often, it is complex inner conflicts of shame and guilt that drive the survivors away from their past, but make them, like any trauma victim, compulsively repeat the acts that lead to its remembrance.<sup>534</sup>

*In The Book of Blam*, for instance, we follow Blam, the only survivor of a Jewish family through the streets of contemporary Novi Sad. As he tries to regain his old family house and looks for traces of the fascist Hungarian commander who sent the Jews of the

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<sup>532</sup> See Aleksandar Tišma, *Povratak Miru* [The Return to Peace] (Beograd: Nolit, 1977).

<sup>533</sup> See Marianne Hirsch's distinction between "familial" and "affiliative" forms of postmemory which cannot be completely applied in the case of Andy, which involves both very early childhood memories, but also the appropriation of family memories that can be read as postmemorial. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory*, 22-23.

<sup>534</sup> See Caruth, *Trauma*, 25.

town to their death, he is haunted by painful memories and guilt: for having saved his own life by marrying a Christian woman, for not having been able to warn his parents and sister, for denying his own origins and allegiance. The balance between sentimental appeal and realist contrast that is achieved by Kiš's «ironic lyricism» is lacking here. The irony in Tišma's narrative does not show up so much through rhetorical figures as through the bitter coincidences in the plot: the fact that Blam's mother's Hungarian lover is the same person who will later participate in the raids that led to the Danube massacre, that both his rebellious sister as well as another communist friend die because of a small piece of misplaced information, that his first love, an Austrian Jew, survives in Mussolini's Italy while his own family perishes in a region which was deemed safe due to its multiethnic demography. The irony furthermore lies in the fact that man, when left to his own devices, will always choose self-preservation over lofty ethical ideals. To Tišma, the Central European character in the 20th century bears both the potential for emancipation and destruction. In his autobiographical travelogue "Meridians of Central Europe," he observes passengers at a rural Czech train station:

I felt as if I had already seen this picture a hundred times on the stations of past travels and as if I had known or even described [...] these people with their tired, dignified faces. Those were people from small, remote Central European towns, people with cultivated conventions that were above their means, people with adept hands but fickle hearts, people who had torn down the walls of a bigger whole and were now drudgely carrying the weight of their curtailed freedom.[...] Dangerous people.[...] I was not travelling in an abstract, nonwestern direction, but on Central European territory, a territory whose features resounded in me like the steps in the house I used to live in. In a way, I was travelling through my extended, forgotten self.<sup>535</sup>

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<sup>535</sup> Aleksandar Tišma, "Meridijani Srednje Evrope," in Aleksandar Tišma, *Drugde. Putopisi* [Elsewhere. Travelogues] (Belgrade: Prosveta, 1996), 51 -99.



Different overlapping metaphors demonstrate the narrator's entanglement with the space of Central Europe. The "picture" of the small-town Central European train station carries iconic weight since it is symptomatic for the current state of a region, but also offers the key to the narrator's own identity: the people in the picture, their clothing and habits demonstrate to Tišma the permanent atmosphere of discontent at the former Habsburg periphery, never able to consolidate their modest upbringing with the mannerisms of the administration at the center. The restrictions that come with the imperial rule are painted as less precarious than the nationalist drive that only leads to "curtailed freedom" under Soviet occupation. In a curious synesthesia, the "features" of this picture are described as "resounding" in the narrator like the steps in a former home. To be sure, a home must be abandoned in order for a visitor's steps to resound in it, and for Tišma, it is this abandoned home that needs to be explored in order to retain the "forgotten self." To demonstrate how the exploration of Central Europe as a retrieval of disavowed parts of self is taking place, I would like to examine, along with the aforementioned travelogue, the short story "Without a Cry" [Bez krika], first published in the collection *Culprits* [Krivice], 1961 and a few short selections of *The Book of Blam*. Just as with Kiš's "Variations on Central European Themes," I argue that Tišma's "Meridians of Central Europe," can be used to decode the tropes of spatial memory that appear in his fiction. Though not fragmented like in Kiš's essay, the reflections on literature, history, and memory embedded in the autobiographical narrative of the travelogue offer valuable meta-literary clues for Tišma's poetics of Central Europe. Finally, I will expand on the question of what constitutes Tišma's "realism" and how it affects his poetics of memory, where it intersects with Kiš's perception of the term, and where it diverges from it. As

has already been pointed out, for Kiš, literary realism hinged not on the mimetic representation of reality but instead on the “illusion of truth” as it was achieved through the insertion of documents, such as the photographs transcribed earlier. But the document is always a space-holder for what cannot be said directly. A realistic depiction or “naming” of “the horrors of history” is not permissible both out of ethical and aesthetic considerations, as Kiš confers:

[...] I’m reluctant to name them. The victim is in a position of weakness and mortification. I’d be displaying my stumps and scars, as it were, which is equally distasteful to the displayer and the beholder. Refusing to name them gives them dignity. What I write isn’t meant to make anyone feel guilty; it’s meant to provide a kind of catharsis. For me the unnamed victim is the greatest victim of history.<sup>536</sup>

The crude display of both physical and emotional wounds that Kiš rejects due to its evocation of pathos is a central element to Tišma’s realism. As I have demonstrated earlier, physicality in its concrete, sensuous form is important to Kiš when describing the childhood home of a character, the child’s bodily reactions to a dream, war-time hunger, a pogrom in the village. However, Kiš’s catharsis is to be achieved not by shocking the reader into pity and fear, but rather by making him fill in the gap between what is told and what is concealed. This is why the witness perspective is always curtailed and obscured in Kiš’s writing, not just because the witness is a child and therefore even less reliable than a narrative of a traumatic account would already be, but because the witness is also a victim that needs to be protected. Therefore, in his story “The Pogrom” in *Early Sorrows*, the child’s view of a pogrom is obscured by the legs and torsos of the looting adults – and it is this half-secluded position that keeps him from harm.<sup>537</sup>

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<sup>536</sup> Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, 207.

<sup>537</sup> Danilo Kiš, “Pogrom,” *Rani Jadi*, 22.

Tišma's view of the document is not that removed from Kiš's in that it recognizes the investigative help that documents provide for a reader who is trying to piece together a lost past:

To me, the document is a trace of life. It bears all the fascination of traces: based on the document, we can conjure up events, people, situations, which have gone by and do not exist anymore. A letter, photograph, court report, diary, a report or personal advertisement in the paper, all of these are still vibrating from a certain moment when they were still engaged in the course of events. Now this moment is no more. Now it has become a piece of paper. And this is another fascinating property of the document, this exchange of values, this twofold role, or deceptive role, if you like. The mere fact that the people and events that have created it have disappeared, has changed the value of the document, most frequently it has been devaluated. We can bring it back to life with the help of our imagination, but of course this will only be a partial or even wrong resuscitation because only the person who has created the document, and only in the moment that they created it, had a proper sense of its meaning...<sup>538</sup>

Tišma also gives credit to the document's ambivalent status – being observed belatedly, and out of its original context, it retains only a faint shadow of its aura, and those who observe it impose their own incomplete interpretation, their own emplotment onto it. It is therefore strange when he posits the common devaluation of a document that is not in use anymore, for this view can only be supported by someone who does not connect the document to a person, community, place or era that has been lost. Such a bond cannot only “conjure up” the object in question, but may often be the only proof that it existed in the first place. The document can be banal and disposable only for those who wish to cut all ties with the past or are asked to do so for the sake of a larger paradigm shift – such as the transition to a new political system. In fact, Tišma may be citing the negligence of documents to point to a more general negligence of the past in Yugoslav memory politics.

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<sup>538</sup> Tišma as quoted in Marković, *Prostori realizma*, 301.

Such a criticism is embedded rather clearly in his short story “Without a Cry,” which was first published in 1961, the year of his trip to Poland, Vienna and Budapest, on which the “Meridians of Central Europe” are based.

“Without a Cry” is set in Novi Sad on a sweltering summer day in the August of 1952, more than ten years after the Cold Days massacre that occurred in January 1942. The protagonist, who, as the reader learns, is a survivor of the massacre, refuses to attend a commemorative ceremony for the victims at the cemetery and decides to spend the day bathing in the Danube. He does feel conflicted about it, but his guilt for not paying his respect to those who have perished is outweighed by his aversion to the public memorial culture he anticipates:

I was taken aback by the stereotypical tone the celebration was given in our local newspaper, which foregrounded the attendance of some important people over the cause itself – commemorating the victims of the occupation – in its tragic meaning. Already the announcements that appeared in three, four installments exuded an atmosphere of speeches and responses, wreaths, organized grief and sophisticated thoughts that were capable of extinguishing even the most sincere sentiment.<sup>539</sup>

The official ceremony is so easy to dismiss because it is organized as a political spectacle: impersonal, the victims are subsumed into one anonymous mass, it is also inflated with ideological phrases and public pathos, turning individual suffering into collective, easily consumable experience. The survivor juxtaposes this artificial ritual of collective memory to his own promise of commemorating the dead, a promise, which however, he has failed to keep.

I reminded myself [...] of this weakly kept promise which I once, at the end of the war, deeply moved by my eventual escape, gave to myself: that I would always

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<sup>539</sup> Aleksandar Tišma, “Without a Cry,” in *Bez Krika. Devet pripovedaka* (Belgrade: Nolit, 1980), 7. All translations mine.

remember those who had been torn from the shores of life during the fickle, dangerous years, that I would be the one who preserved the memory of the friends and acquaintances among them, even if no one else did. Whatever happened to that promise? An occasional fleeing thought, upon passing a familiar house in which I played as a child with one of them, or when meeting a man whose face reminded me of one of the missing, in the midst of a party or at work [...] And then the regret, of course, caused by my sinful forgetfulness, and the vague unconvincing delusion that I will redeem myself one day with a precisely focused act of memory, conjuring up before me a line of beloved faces, a renewed experience of all their features, their movements, their habits – what an absurdly naïve and deceptive idea!<sup>540</sup>

Just like the commemoration machinery of Socialist Yugoslavia, the survivor's commitment to memory is driven by a specific agenda: he imagines that by remembering and commemorating the dead in the right way, he will be able to pay moral tribute for his escape and thus assuage his survivor guilt. He is aware however, of the discrepancy between his experiences of involuntary memory, which is triggered by random encounters with places and individuals, and the "precisely focused act of memory" he feels obliged to perform. His actual memory is fragmented, not anticipated, in need to visual triggers from his environment, while his "act of memory" is a complete, willfully conjured defilee of ghosts. Both the survivor's idealized and actual memory, however, emphasize the human face as a marker of individuality, thus distinguishing the personal "memory act" from the uniformity of the organized memory ritual. What is striking in the anticipated vision of the memory ritual is also the absence of any imagery, in fact of any sensory detail besides the funeral wreaths. Ironically, the bathing trip that the narrator chooses over the visit to the cemetery abounds with sensual metaphors and imagery. When he immerses himself in the waters of the Danube, the river turns into an animistic force that offers the sensual, even erotic escape the protagonist has been yearning for:

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid., 7-8.

I dove under the water, feeling only its transparent caresses and following with my wandering gaze, above the water, from below the water, sensing only the still blue evenness around me, the river banks floating by ceremoniously and calmly, while still staying firmly in place around me, the celestial cupola above me, with the glowing torch that was the sun at its center – observing all of this while feeling completely calm, in my slanted floating position in the midst of the benevolent element, not paying attention to time, nor myself, nor the wish that this may last forever.<sup>541</sup>

At first, the river appears as an ahistorical, atemporal space in which all memory, all thinking is suspended. The protagonist and the reader succumb to the illusory dichotomy of the natural and historical space, along with the impression that this seemingly natural space can provide the soothing forgetfulness that can never be attained in historical space. But the relief is only temporary – as the survivor approaches the shore again, feeling deceptively unburdened and purified, he is shaken up by a moment of comparison and epiphany: “Right then, returning with my thoughts unexpectedly to [the ceremony] I was missing at this moment, I was not able to connect this Danube to the same river which not too long ago had swallowed more than one thousand and a few hundred bloody bodies.”<sup>542</sup> The river becomes both the trigger for traumatic memory, as well as its repository, since it appears that through the immersion in its waters, events that have been witnessed and stored by its surface in the bather’s consciousness. This turns the river into a fractured space that consists of two versions that the protagonist cannot reconcile with each other – the site of leisurely peace in the summer of 1952, and the site of gruesome carnage more than a decade earlier. In the following scene of traumatic remembering, distinctions between personal and collective memory becomes blurred. Though the

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<sup>541</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid., 12.

“promise to remember the victims” from the beginning of the story clearly describes the narrator as someone who has survived the massacre, it not entirely clear whether the images and scenes that are contained in the traumatic revisiting of the crime scene were all witnessed by him. The stark, film-like ‘cuts’ between different perspectives rather suggest that he is drawing information from an archive of memory that is constituted by the river itself. The survivor remembers how the victims of the 1942 massacre were brought “to the same swimming grounds, shot before the entrance, and so they were standing in queue, which might remind a hopeless parodist of the queues during peak visitor times of summery Sunday afternoons [...] this is were those people queued up. A terrible queue it was! An inhumane, gruesome queue.”<sup>543</sup> This first part of the description contains summarizing elements that could have been part of a news report, while the comparison of the queues of victims to the current summer time queues, is more personal and ravaging because of the morbid irony it entails. It is the incompatibility of those two images that, by means of cognitive collapse, that makes room for traumatic memory. At this moment of recognition, the survivor is sucked into the vortex of involuntary memory and revisits in his mind the “orgy of dying” that he witnessed that day. As the narration switches from the past to the present tense and from the first to the second person perspective to create a more affective immediacy, Tišma delivers one of the typical scenes of visceral violence and despair which have continued to disconcert the Yugoslav critics:

[B]ayonets rush at you, with wild mustaches and mad eyes, then they grab you and drag you away, they grab your child, your wife and your mother and drag them away, and they beat you and yell at you to take off your coat, and you don't understand so they beat you again, then you understand, and with trembling

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<sup>543</sup> Ibid., 12.

fingers you unbutton your coat and take it off, then the one underneath it too, and you take off the little coat of your child, even though it is terribly cold and the icy wind is stinging at your back and face, and they tear off the coats from your wife and your mother.[...] over there, in the front, fires are burning, lots of commotion, struggling and yelling, falling and disappearing – to where? You don't understand, until you are seized by the final whirl, the pain, the flame, and reduced to stony terror you see, you finally see the exit, the hole: cut into the ice, above the blood-stained dead water, protruding along its fringes are skulls, feet, shoulders, into this hole your child is falling too, still warm, with a split skull, with petrified final groans, and into which you are shoved by a blow, by your agony, by a cramp.<sup>544</sup>

The affective force of this excerpt is generated by the fact the reader is lured simultaneously into a witness and victim perspective through the use of the second person: it is not an unidentifiable mass that is slaughtered but the “you” that is addressed, while this “you” also becomes the observer and the survivor. The family that is being torn apart and murdered affects the reader through its painful sensory detail -- the unintelligible screams of the soldiers, the trembling fingers of the father as he unbuttons his child’s “little coat,” the separation of women and men. What *Tišma* reproduces here is a fast-paced filmic sequence of images chasing each other. The paratactic, staccato-like sentence structure contributes to the frantic pace of the sequence, the sense of utter panic that underlies it. Finally, the cinematic gaze cuts from the family to the “the exit, the hole” which will reduce it to a heap of dismembered corpses. In the end, the reader, as the narrative “you,” both witnesses and survives his own execution. Shifting back to a first-person narrative, the protagonist emerges from this assault of memory as if from a nightmare – with the help of the Danube as a memory trigger he has performed the “act of memory” he has been longing for, but not in the manner that he imagined. Instead of the idealized “line of beloved faces,” he is confronted with the “inhumane, gruesome

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<sup>544</sup> Ibid., 13-14



queue.” It is this nightmarish revisiting of the past that inspires him to head to the cemetery after all, just as the ceremony is about to close. What he sees there not only confirms his pessimistic expectations (boring speeches, staged grief, the ideological appropriation of suffering) but also devalues the cemetery’s status as the appropriate memory space:

[Th]e speech had a tone of finality, quick-paced, already slightly out of breath, tired. Perhaps this is why it did not feel moved by it, or perhaps because it tried with every sentence to connect the victims of the occupation with the struggle of mankind towards progress. Which did not speak to my experience at the Danube today, where the true graves of those who were mourned here lay.<sup>545</sup>

The space that belongs to the victims, the space that carries their memory and where they should also be officially remembered is the Danube, at the very site of their murder. Ironically, an involuntary overlapping of those two spaces occurs when an honorary salvo of guns is fired and violently transports the attendants to the scene of execution: “The masses were startled, holding their breath in fright. I tensed up as well, suddenly transported back to a sight which unfolded behind the soldiers who had fired the shots: bodies writhing under a gray, low, impenetrable sky [...].”<sup>546</sup> Because they divest memory of its personal dimension and leave no room for real grief, the official public “acts of memory” are in fact perpetuating the trauma of fascist terror. In Tišma’s story, the obligation to keep memory alive is ultimately relegated to the witness/survivor, but also to the space around him. In the case of this story, it is a natural space, but like the urban locations that are foregrounded in his other stories and novels, the Danube is a

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<sup>545</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid., 16.

crucial component of the larger repository of memory that is Central Europe. The Danube, in fact, is the ideal spatial mythologeme of Central Europe because it connects much of the territory of the former Habsburg Empire, and carries symbolic meaning far beyond its logistical significance. Especially in Austria, it is highly romanticized in both folk culture and literature as a space that promises pleasure, relaxation, love, and adventure for those who seek it out.<sup>547</sup> By turning it into a mass grave, Tišma points to the perversion of these popular myths through human atrocity. Central Europe after the assault of totalitarian ideologies is a threatening space in which nothing is as it seems, and where locations that presently seem stable or serene can be superimposed by their former selves through everyday triggers of memory. This double image is also at the heart of Tišma's travelogue "The Meridians of Central Europe."

As has already been indicated, the "Meridians" do not only chart a map of Tišma's itinerary through three Central European countries (Poland, Austria and Hungary) but they offer an exploration of the author's own conflicted sense of self. In an interview with Luka Mičeta, Tišma confessed that it was his trip to Poland that triggered memories of occupied Novi Sad and inspired his subsequent literary obsession with the crimes committed during that period.<sup>548</sup> Tišma's text, like Kiš's, is influenced by the geopolitical coordinates of the Cold War, but with a much greater emphasis on the divisions and losses that can be felt as its consequence. Already in his introductory remarks, Tišma maps out the different spatial markers: "the East" (Poland, Hungary),

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<sup>547</sup> See Claudio Magris, *Danube* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989).

<sup>548</sup> Interview with Aleksandar Tišma by Luka Miceta, on the Alexandria Press website [http://www.alexandria-press.com/arhiva/No\\_1/aleksandar\\_Tišma.htm](http://www.alexandria-press.com/arhiva/No_1/aleksandar_Tišma.htm). Accessed on January 12th, 2015.

“the West” (Austria), and Yugoslavia, occasionally also identified with “the Balkans,” as a third space that belongs to neither. He confesses that the trip was not so much motivated by the wish to visit Central Europe, but by a longstanding yearning for “the West,” as exemplified by Vienna, which he always imagined to be a “more lively and more perfect world than the one I was living in.”<sup>549</sup> Passports for Yugoslav citizens were only issued in 1956 and so Tišma had not been able to travel outside Yugoslavia before that – he had never seen Vienna or any other city on the other side of the Iron Curtain, even though he had studied French and German literature in Budapest, Zagreb and Belgrade.<sup>550</sup> The trip to Poland is therefore seized as an opportunity to explore his personal fantasies as well as revisit a period of his youth during the war, when he was living in Budapest. But even before the travel narrative begins, he admits that traveling through divergent exterior spaces has facilitated an interior integration of split parts: “I oriented myself a little more precisely in space. Gained a bit more wholeness, in myself, following the example of wholeness into which the individual points of my *Marschrout*e connected themselves.”<sup>551</sup> The travel itinerary as a route of marching already sets the tone for the rest of the narrative, during which Central Europe will emerge as a battlefield of ideologies and memories, a space of ruins and of absences.<sup>552</sup>

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<sup>549</sup> Tišma, *Meridijani*, 51.

<sup>550</sup> Interview with Alexandria Press.

<sup>551</sup> Tišma, “Meridijani,” 52.

<sup>552</sup> Although “maršruta» has been decoupled from its military origins in the Serbo-Croatian adaptation like so many germanisms, the fact that Tišma knew German might make this appear in a different light.

Memories do not only set in once Tišma has reached Poland, in fact they surface in stages, and gradually move from a more personal to a collective, cultural experience. Already at the Yugoslav-Hungarian border, while waiting for the border patrol to enter his compartment, a haphazard technical defect transports him back to the days of his youth, when he was constantly travelling between Novi Sad and Budapest. Caught off guard by the approaching night, the traveler and his companions realize that the lights do not work. Moving through the dark wagon like stealthy refugees, the sight of customs officers beneath the windows and their harsh Hungarian voices bring back the familiar panic: “For a moment, I felt occupied again.”<sup>553</sup> He also offers insight into the contradictory workings of traumatic memory: he attributes the “shock” of the situation to the wartime “habit” of recognizing dangerous situations, but their constant repetition, which lead to “habituation,” has eventually taught him to suppress the same experiences. From then on this travels will be marked by the tension between the familiar and the foreign, and their traditional roles will become reversed: what he recognizes as familiar becomes uncanny, threatening, while the “curiosities“ he was hoping to find turn out to be unsatisfying or illusory.

Once in Poland, Tišma painstakingly records the differences between Soviet Eastern Europe and “the Balkans” (or Yugoslavia). He marvels at the rigidly structured schedule that is presented to the Yugoslavs upon their arrival and notices that the amount of time and money available to their own enjoyment is significantly smaller than that of the Polish visitors in Yugoslavia. After several days packed with trips to tourist sites, concerts and regal banquets, his respect for the “second greatest Slavic nation after

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<sup>553</sup> Ibid., 53.

Russia“ has not diminished, but he cannot establish a personal relationship with it: “Is this, too, the Central Europe I know?,” he wonders.<sup>554</sup> The familiarities he is looking for can be found in structures of violence: He compares the organizational skills of the Polish hosts to the bureaucratic efficiency of Horthy’s fascists, while simultaneously realizing how bizarre this comparison is, the Polish being victims of fascism themselves. The underlying violence in postwar Poland is caused by a deeply conflicted relationship to the recent past, which results in the schism between private and public truth. When he breaks away from the official program, he learns about the injustices that are eclipsed from public memory in the name of totalitarian ideology:

He told me [...] about the heroes of the resistance movement who were stigmatized as anglophiles. About the women whose husbands and brothers were slaughtered in the woods of Katyn. About the professors who were giving lectures and issuing diplomas from illegal universities during the occupation – because Hitler had shut down the legal ones – and who were left jobless after the liberation. About writers who were subjected to a conspiracy of silence because they wanted to write freely. About others who accepted the lack of freedom and destroyed their gift. [...]<sup>555</sup>

The “woods of Katyn,” where 22,000 Polish officers were murdered by the Soviet secret police in 1940, is a memory site that cannot be publicly acknowledged in Soviet occupied Poland.<sup>556</sup> Also highly edited in public representation, if not suppressed, are the Polish sites of the Holocaust, particularly Auschwitz and the Warsaw ghetto. It is while visiting these that Tišma connects his continuous feeling of discomfort to his hosts’ inability to deal with the Jewish question. The combination of national pride and a communist focus

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<sup>554</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>556</sup> See Louis Fitz-Gibbon, *Katyn: a Crime Without Parallel* (New York: Scribner, 1971). The Yugoslav filmmaker Dušan Makavejev used original Nazi footage of Katyn from 1943 in his highly controversial 1974 avantgarde feature *Sweet Movie*, which combines a critique of communism with that of consumerism and sexual repression.

on progress has turned Poland into a space that is fractured, full of contradictions: The fastidious restoration of the historical quarters in Warsaw is the counterpart to the gap left at the site of the Warsaw ghetto, the traces of which have been carefully erased. In a moment of epiphany, Tišma realizes that the absence of Jewish life is the “missing element” that connects all of Central Europe:

[This missing element] does not exist in Lublin, which I did not manage to visit but which – as I know from literature – was once brimming with black caftans and hats and curly locks and throaty voices and lively gesticulation. It does not exist in Warsaw, where a multi-story house in the ghetto would shelter a whole tribe – at the site of the ghetto there is now a huge empty field with a single stereotypical monument in the middle, and new developments in the background. It does not exist because in Poland, only one out of a 100,000 thousand Jews survived – this makes 40,000 out of 4 million – and that one does not seek to rebuild the old community together with the other survivors, but runs from it, because it reminds him of the gas chambers. [...] Something similar has been of course true – in partially less disastrous proportions – for the whole of Central Europe, after the wave of destruction that occurred in the name of one national myth.<sup>557</sup>

Tišma realizes that Central Europe is a crime scene that has been sloppily covered up, and where the traces of the displaced and murdered resurface unexpectedly, not just in the sites themselves, but even more importantly through the living relics of those sites: the Jewish survivors. During his travels, Tišma meets three of these survivors and is impressed by their “indestructible, fatalistic power of resistance.” Marked by displacement and alienation, they stand symbolically for the tragic fragmentation of Central Europe. The most intense encounter occurs in Vienna, the mythical western part of Europe which the younger writer had dreamed of visiting for so long. Upon his arrival,

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<sup>557</sup> Ibid., 66.

Tišma notices an array of “Pannonian names”<sup>558</sup> on store fronts, but the ethnic diversity of Vienna is camouflaged by the common tendency to blend in with the uniform masses. In general, the traveler is disappointed by the assimilated, bourgeois, and lethargic atmosphere of the city. He notices the same historical apathy and resistance towards change that Musil had elaborated on so pointedly in his *Man Without Qualities*, where he lamented the conservatism of Austria-Hungary.<sup>559</sup> Having lost his orientation in a blizzard on his way home, Tišma is aided by a Polish Jew who is crossing the same Danube bridge in the middle of the night. Educated and polite, with a calm and amiable disposition, he is the prime example of the wandering Jew: having lived in Poland, Russia, and Australia for several years, he has also visited Israel and the United States before settling down in Vienna and taking on Austrian citizenship. He speaks with enthusiasm about every place he has lived in but particularly praises Lviv/Lemberg, which had a vibrant Jewish community during the Habsburg period, as “the most beautiful city on earth,” also lauds “beautiful” Russia and Poland, not wasting a single word on the war, anti-Semitism or displacement.<sup>560</sup> While Tišma is struggling against the furious blizzard, he appears stable and composed, only when he looks up for an instant his “haggard, gray face” indicates the horrors he must have been through.<sup>561</sup> More than anything, this encounter reveals Tišma’s own expectations about what a survivor should look like: clearly, he is puzzled by the man’s refusal to be a victim, demonstrated by his resilience against the storm during which he stops by at the opera to take a look at the

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<sup>558</sup> Ibid., 77. “Pannonia” refers to the geographical region of the Pannonian Plain, which encompasses the countries of Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Czech Republic, Serbia, Croatia, Hungary, Romania, Slovenia and Ukraine. Novi Sad is part of this territory.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 74-75.

evening program. His amusement at the survivor's ability to "find something beautiful in every place" reveals how threatened he feels by the rootlessness this ability requires.

Tišma's diary entry upon returning from the trip reveals how much he unwillingly identified with the archetype of the wandering Jew: "Got back from Poland, Vienna, Budapest, only to realize how alone and estranged I am in everything. I am a Jew, a man without a country, but also a man deprived of the Jewish capacity for quick adaptation and identification with a community that until recently has been foreign to me."<sup>562</sup> The unexpected solidarity he experiences with the community of Central European Jewry leads to a profound identity crisis when he realizes that he has suppressed his Jewish heritage in order not to succumb to "national mysticism" – his reflections while writing the travelogue demonstrate to which extent Tišma had internalized anti-Semitic stereotypes around Jewish life and Jewish writing: "I have never been this personal in my writing. [...] Should I become a painfully personal, miserably personal, maudlin little Jew? This would contradict my principles as a human being up until now, which include the desperate clinging to my own dignity."<sup>563</sup> While the fact that Kiš and Tišma both had rejected a categorization of their works into the field of Jewish literature as too limiting (Kiš in fact speaks of "ghettoization"), their conflicted relationship to Judaism can and should also be attributed to what Kiš perceived as the latently anti-Semitic atmosphere of Socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>564</sup> Tišma's later books, populated by abandoned characters who are

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<sup>562</sup> See Tisma,'s diary entry from Nov 12, 1961 in Aleksandar Tišma, *Dnevnik, 1942 -2001* [Diary] (Sremski Karlovci: Z. Stojanovica, 2001), 424. Translation mine.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid., 425. Diary entry from Dec 3, 1961.

<sup>564</sup> See Danilo Kiš, introduction to *Anatomy Lesson*. In *Čas anatomije* (Beograd: Nolit, 1978). It is questionable how much of this perception was related to reality, and how much of it was



unable to settle down, demonstrate a shift in perspective on the subject of home and belonging that can be attributed to the insights gained on his travels through Central Europe. Upon seeing tenants in their homes in postwar Novi Sad, the lone survivor Miroslav Blam in the *Book of Blam* concludes that the attachment to a home produces victims:

Any home is disastrous if it is alive, if you depend on it for you life's blood, if you cannot live without it. Then the bullets hit not only you, nor can you even fling yourself to the ground, take cover. There is no cover when you're burdened with love and the patrol is after you. There is no way out. You are being led to the altar to be sacrificed. They push you on, you can't turn back, your head hangs low.<sup>565</sup>

The image of Central Europe as a precarious home appears to be confined to its periphery – Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, but also Yugoslavia reflect the provincial dissatisfaction, mistrust and suppressed violence that Tišma experiences on his travels. And yet the former capital of the Habsburgs, Vienna, contributes to this dynamic through its insistence on Habsburg nostalgia, “wishing to conserve itself in a former state” and denying its participation in creating the postwar topography of violence. Only Vienna's denial rests on a different ideology than Krakow's or Belgrade's, since it is furthered by the economic stability of postwar capitalism. It stands for the part of Central Europe that

freed herself from the responsibility of this century full of injustice and violence; which, while her wild, uncultured brothers were revolting all around her, took a quick step backwards at the last moment and closed the door, and perhaps also her eyes, to the flood that threatened to sweep her away as well. Like an old shopkeeper who fled from bankruptcy to the shelter of her apartment. An apartment that is nothing compared to the standards of today's trading rooms, but which in return is clean, freed from the nuisance of suspicious customers and

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determined with Kiš's personal obsession with his own Jewish identity. In *Birth Certificate*, Mark Thompson relates how quickly Kiš associated attacks based on sectarian cultural politics with anti-Semitism.

<sup>565</sup> Aleksandar Tišma, *Book of Blam*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harcourt & Brace & Company, 1998), 7.

attendants, and into which [...] the trophy of former prosperity and preciousness has been carefully stowed away.<sup>566</sup>

Again, Tišma tries to capture the historical development of Central Europe by means of a spatial, domestic metaphor. From a small-town train station at the periphery, it appears as the abandoned “former home;” viewed from the former administrative center of that entity, Vienna, it becomes a sealed-off, confined habitat, secure but completely divested of its outreach during the Habsburg period. His observations correspond to the “house of Austria” painted by Ingeborg Bachmann and Peter Handke, who criticize the complacency and hypocrisy of the Second Austrian Republic.

Like Kiš, Tišma presents Central Europe as a space marked by loss, but the crucial difference between the two authors lies in the ways that the past can be retrieved and accessed. As has been pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, this is largely due to the generational gap between them: Kiš’s poetics of affinities is based on an experimental, at times playful reassembling of the Central European puzzle, while Tišma’s writing is based on a sober realism that is deemed appropriate for the witness perspective.

In Tišma, it is therefore the survivor and witness who experiences involuntary memories and retraumatization by the ongoing exposure to an environment turned repository for the violence committed in it. This space of ruin shares its testimonial agency with that of the wandering, isolated witness, who is driven to revisit sites of trauma through a unconscious effort for integration – be that in his own hometown or the region at large. Paradoxically, those spatial triggers of memory are simultaneously

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<sup>566</sup> Tišma, “Meridijani,” 78.

covered up and activated by the contrary effort of memory politics in socialist Yugoslavia. Due to its extreme contrast, the unedited past protrudes from underneath the recent narrative layer of progress and heroism even more sharply. None of the “coating of guilt and noble patina” that Kiš attaches to his childhood memories of Central Europe is present in *Tišma*, because his adult protagonists have never left, and the imaginative projection that happens through the remove of exile is foreign to them. To be sure, both authors present the reader with fragmented characters who are attempting to ‘work through’ the historical legacy of Central Europe, a task which is complicated by the ideological conflict of the Cold War. And what has not been acknowledged through public history is therefore explored through fiction, where the individual experience of terror and displacement can be expressed without censorship. This is true in spite of the politically more neutral stance of Yugoslavia, which is why both Kiš’s “Variations on Central European Themes” and *Tišma*’s “Meridians of Central Europe” still map out a space that is fundamentally divided and haunted by the past. They are aware that as Yugoslavs, being able to voice their skepticism and dissatisfaction towards political shortcomings both east and west more or less openly is a privilege that their fellow Polish or Hungarian writers, subjected to strict Soviet censorship, do not have, which makes them mediating voices in the discourse. At the heart of their agenda lies a humanism which was, even if not generated, at least corroborated by the Yugoslav education system that considered art an elevating force for the citizens of its republic.<sup>567</sup> This is why both authors refer to writing and reading as “cathartic” experiences, only that *Tišma* arrives at this catharsis through dark realism, and Kiš’s by means of his “documentary method.” In

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<sup>567</sup> See Andrew B. Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant after Communism: the Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

Kiš, the documentary does not just include narrated photographs, witness reports, paintings, but extends to the formal level as well – the fragmentation of his texts into vignettes or isolated snapshots, be that in the “Variations” or in his short prose, gives them a document-like aura. These documents always function as pieces of a scattered unity, be that the nucleus of the family or a collective idea of Central Europe. Despite the fact that Kiš was wary of the promulgation of collective identities, his concept of the network allowed him to affirm common values while also preserving his ideal of ethical autarky. Tišma differs in this respect: in his narratives, community is always shattered, not trustworthy, and dangerous. The individual is alone and vulnerable to the ravaging forces of history, since there is no community among the victims, and the community of heroes has been debunked as a national lie.

The image of Central Europe as a network of cultural references, which includes a common, albeit complex history is therefore unique to Kiš and comes closer to the “community of fate” as affirmed by Milan Kundera and György Konrad. What Kiš shares with Tišma, however, is a general affirmation of Central Europe as an antidote to nationalism and political ideology, an affirmation which is directly linked to his identity as a Yugoslav Jew. Kundera had already attributed the destruction of Central European Jewry as a “loss of soul” for the whole region, something that was also affirmed by antinationalist Austrian authors, but to Kiš and Tišma, uncovering the Jewish trauma of Central Europe is a highly personal literary endeavor. To escape sentimentality and partisanship, both authors strove to present Jewishness as a paradigm rather than a subjective historical experience, as Kiš states: “[in my writing] Jewishness serves only as a mark of defamiliarization. Anyone who fails to understand that knows nothing of the

mechanics of literary transposition.”<sup>568</sup> The hybrid, malleable, multilingual identity that Kundera attributes to European Jews is transferred onto Central European intellectuals in general but finds its ultimate expression in cultural Yugoslavism:

If you tell them that in that light (in the light of tradition) you are a Yugoslav writer, they consider that a kind of lie, or rootlessness, which arouses pity or anger, they assume that by choice you wanted to hide, to mask your true allegiance, as though you had tried from the start, as in a race, to occupy a place in space and time, as though you had visited all the regions of our country, all at once, though from their point you are a man of nowhere, a Wandering Jew [...].<sup>569</sup>

What makes Yugoslavism, decoupled from Socialist ideology, more attractive as an identity marker is its defiance of homogenous nationalist or ethnic labels, since it subsumes a plethora of nationalities, languages and creeds. This is why “Yugoslav” and “Central European” ultimately become interchangeable as attributes for hybridity and openness for both Kiš and Tišma, as a form of cultural “non-alignment.” Despite their dissatisfaction over the politicized literary climate, and being acutely aware of the ethnic tensions between Croats and Serbs, they still insisted on calling themselves “Yugoslavs,” even after fleeing from these tensions into exile.<sup>570</sup> Central Europe thus becomes the dark side of the Yugoslav promise of “brotherhood and unity,” as the failure of its “national experiment” resembles the downfall of the multinational Habsburg Empire.

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<sup>568</sup> Kiš, *Homo Poeticus*, 38.

<sup>569</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>570</sup> See Istvan Eörsi, “‘Ich bin der letzte jugoslawische Schriftsteller.’ (Danilo Kiš)” *Rowohlt Literaturmagazin. Nr. 41. Danilo Kiš*. March (1998): 5-30; and Aleksandar Tišma, *Šta sam govorio*. [What I spoke of] (Novi Sad: Prometej, 1996.)

## **Chapter 4: *Mittleuropa* after 1989. New Memory Challenges in Christoph Ransmayr and Dubravka Ugrešić**

### **Historical Overview**

What happened to *Mittleuropa* after the historical watershed of 1989? One might assume that with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the disintegration of the Soviet Union, György Konrád's "Dream of Central Europe" had come true. With the end of the Cold War, the borders open, and nothing to halt the organic merging of the continent, the separation between eastern and western Europe may as well be taken for a thing of the past. But when former West German chancellor Willy Brandt famously declared that the reunification of Germany allowed the 'growing back together' of parts that intrinsically belonged to each other, he was not referring to the whole of Europe. Since the division of Europe into 'east' and 'west' had not been invented during the Cold War, but had been in the making since the Enlightenment, it should not come as a surprise that the divided mindset persisted beyond the end of that profound political crisis, not just in Germany.<sup>571</sup> The relief that western European intellectuals felt at the demise of the Iron Curtain was short lived, and would soon be overtaken by new nationalisms and the horrors of civil war. At the same time that the promise of a Europe without borders suddenly became available to the former eastern bloc, it fell apart for a group that had already believed itself essentially Central European: the multiethnic, multilingual Yugoslavs.

The outbreak of the secession wars in Yugoslavia in 1991 came as a shock to the west and was perceived as a collective European trauma, which also led to the unearthing

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<sup>571</sup> See Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1994), and Tony Judt, *A Grand Illusion? An Essay on Europe* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1996), 43-44.

of an older geographical and cultural designation: the Balkans. Within a few years, Yugoslavia, which had been considered by many Western intellectuals the last European utopia, the country of the “third way” and of “socialism with a human face” had been turned into the savage backyard of Europe in the public imaginary. Writers, journalists, historians and diplomats were drawing mental maps of a new Orient at the margins of the reunited Occident, a place where the myth of thousand year old ethnic hatred was revived both by warring Serbian, Croatian and Bosnian fractions and confirmed by paralyzed Western external observers.<sup>572</sup> Central Europe’s perfect utopia had now attained a regressive, quasi-dystopian dimension, as the author of the “Habsburg Myth,” Claudio Magris, maintains in an essay first published in the German newspaper *taz*:

Das zweite Halbjahr 1989 brachte nicht nur den Kollaps des Kommunismus, sondern ein tiefergehendes Erdbeben, das zahlreiche Kategorien und Aspekte der modernen Zeit in einem archaischen Strudel zu verschlingen scheint, während es viel aufgestaute Wut und viele Überreste einer oftmals barbarischen und regressiven Vergangenheit, die für immer begraben schien, an die Oberfläche schleudert.<sup>573</sup>

The longing for *Mittleuropa*, however, was not shaken but rather propelled by the Yugoslav tragedy; the discourse underwent a new revival since the early 90s, became the subject of symposia, colloquia, and publications again: attempts of constructing its

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<sup>572</sup> See specifically, György Konrad, ed., *Europa im Krieg* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995), a collection of essays that were originally published in the German newspaper *taz* and in which writers from both eastern and western Europe, as well as the dissolved Yugoslavia try to make sense of the conflict. See also Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (1999), and Milica-Bakić Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms. The Case of the Former Yugoslavia,” *Slavic Review*, Volume 54, Issue 4, (1995): 917-31.

<sup>573</sup> Magris, “Dummheit ist das Schicksal unserer Epoche. In Jugoslawien tritt die Geschichte über die Ufer,” *Europa im Krieg*, 113.

literary history and recovering its spaces of memory were made.<sup>574</sup> The main reason for the persistence of *Mitteleuropa* as an idea of cultural and civic exchange is that with the redrawing of the political map after 1989, old divisions were replaced by new ones, as old topographies of terror rose to the surface. This is not so much related to the “archaic vortex” perceived by Magris and others, but rather to the relative memory vacuum that had eclipsed uncomfortable aspects of both fascism and communism in those spaces.<sup>575</sup> The suddenness with which the vacuum dispersed only demonstrated how much the west had become estranged from its eastern neighbors. In spite of the opening of borders, the east remained relatively underexplored for the west in the first decade after the Fall of the Wall, as the German historian Karl Schlögel has observed: “There has been no western *Go East* equivalent to the eastern *Go West*. Western Europe remained sedentary, at home.”<sup>576</sup> This is in spite of the fact that the end of political quarantine has opened access particularly to the shared German history of the region, be that the legacy of Nazi expansion into the east and the Balkans during the Second World War, the displacement of ethnic Germans from the those same territories after the defeat of the Third Reich, or the crimes committed in the name of both fascism and communism that could never be addressed during the memory vacuum of the Cold War. Tony Judt has linked this “return of memory” to the dangerous resuscitation of particularisms:

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<sup>574</sup> See Zoran Konstantinović and Fridrun Ritter, ed., *Eine Literaturgeschichte Mitteleuropas* (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2003) and Jacques Le Rider, Moritz Csáky and Monika Sommer, ed., *Transnationale Gedächtnisorte in Zentraleuropa* (Innsbruck: StudienVerlag, 2002)

<sup>575</sup> See Aleida Assmann, *Erinnerungsräume. Formen und Wandlungen des kulturellen Gedächtnisses* (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 1999), 62.

<sup>576</sup> Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lesen wir die Zeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2007), 464. My translation.



Since 1989 there has been a return of memory and with it, and benefiting from it, a revival of the national units that framed and shaped that memory and give meaning to the collective past. This process threatens to undermine and substitute for the inadequacies of Europe-without-a-past.<sup>577</sup>

The opposing tendencies of exclusive nationalisms and ever-increasing universalisms as articulated in the expansion of the European Union left their mark in the cultural imaginary both in the east and the west. Together with the renewed horrors of war, genocide and displacement this lead to new literary manifestations of utopia, dystopia and nostalgia.

Virtually everywhere, the destiny of Central Europe was linked to the fate of Yugoslavia. While Yugoslavs had only played a minor role in the dissident debate initiated by Milan Kundera, they were now being dragged from the shadows into the limelight, shedding the role of neutral bystander during the Cold War to become the main agent of chaos in Europe. Now the question of Central Europe had turned into the Yugoslav question, and several historical parallels were drawn between the present and the past – most prominently, the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, after a Yugoslav nationalist in Sarajevo assassinated the Austrian heir to the throne Franz Ferdinand, as well as the fascist alliance forged between the Independent State of Croatia and Greater Germany in 1941, exactly fifty years before the eruption of new violence in 1991. Referring to the solidifying divisions between the eastern and western parts of the Yugoslav federation on the debate around Central Europe, the Yugoslav writer Predrag Matvejevic observed in 1989: “In 1914, Gavrilo Princip fired, in the same instant, at both

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<sup>577</sup> Judt, *A Grand Illusion? An Essay on Europe*, 118.

Austria and Central Europe in the name of the Southern Slavs and their unification, a fact remembered by some Yugoslav writers but forgotten by others – and this is what divides them still.”<sup>578</sup> Matvejević is referring to the common historical experience of Croatia, Slovenia, and parts of Bosnia under Habsburg rule, a period which, however conflicted, was increasingly claimed and remembered at literary conventions on Central Europe by both Croatian and Slovenian authors in the late 1980s.<sup>579</sup> This in turn alienated many Serbian writers, who viewed the longing for Habsburg as a threat to Yugoslavism, and also exacerbated existing nationalist tensions, that had undergone a recent flare since the Kosovo crisis of 1981.<sup>580</sup> Thus the perceived internal division of Yugoslavia into a more progressive north and a backward south, what the historian Milica Bakic-Hayden has described as “nesting orientalisms,” preceded the resuscitation of Western “Balkanism” at the onset of the Yugoslav disintegration.<sup>581</sup> Against this background, Kundera’s call for the self-determination of small nations as a remedy for Soviet oppression was salt to a

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<sup>578</sup> Predrag Matvejević, “Central Europe from the East of Europe,” in *In Search for Central Europe*, ed. George Schöpflin and Nancy Wood (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1989), 186.

<sup>579</sup> See Peter Handke’s, *Abschied des Träumers vom neunten Land, eine Wirklichkeit, die vergangen ist. Erinnerung an Slowenien* (1991) or Drago Jančar, “Im Morgengrauen der Engel des Bösen” in *Verteidigung der Zukunft. Suche im verminten Gelände*. Duve Freimut and Nenad Popović (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999).

<sup>580</sup> Matvejević, “Central Europe from the East of Europe,” 185. The escalation of students protests in Pristina in 1981 lead to a prolonged crisis in Kosovo Albanian-Serb relations that was crucial for the eventual dissolution of Yugoslavia. The wave of Serbian centralist politics following it culminated in the revoking of its status as an autonomous province that it had gained with the Yugoslav constitution of 1974.

<sup>581</sup> Bakic-Hayden, “Nesting Orientalisms,” 917-19.

wound that was already festering, which explains why it was so heavily contested particularly from the Serbian side.<sup>582</sup>

This chapter centers on two different revivals of memory that were taking place in the disintegrating Yugoslavia and in Austria from the late 1980s until the early 90s: in Austria, this became manifest in the belated coming to terms with its shared role as perpetrator during the Nazi period, triggered by the Waldheim affair in 1986; in the former Yugoslavia, it showed up through the staging of the Yugoslav secession wars (1991-1994) as a repetition of history, in which the old enemy factions of the Second World War were clashing with each other again. In Austria, the late 1980s saw a turn in the debate on *Mittleuropa*, as literary critics started exploring a Central Europe of the margins that had been eclipsed by a nostalgic focus on the former capital Vienna. Against the euphoria of a reunited Europe post-1989, Karl Markus Gauss evoked the dark legacy of fascism, anti-Semitism and colonialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century which has promoted the destruction of the same Central European culture that was now proudly presented as its heritage.<sup>583</sup> He also pointed out that in the new Europe of trade agreements and liberal markets, exclusivist patterns prevailed in lieu of the projected unity, setting the tone for a new narrative of hegemony. Not being able to escape the shadow of imperialism, this development paradoxically contributed, both in Austria and other nation states, to the

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<sup>582</sup> Vladimir Zorić, “Discordia Concors. Central Europe in Post-Yugoslav Discourses,” in *After Yugoslavia. The Cultural Spaces of a Vanished Land*, ed. Radmila Gorup (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2013), 89.

<sup>583</sup> Karl Markus-Gauss, *Die Vernichtung Mitteleuropas* (Klagenfurt-Salzburg: Wieser Verlag, 1991).

return of narrow-minded regionalisms, something that Ingeborg Bachmann had anticipated with concern in her *Gulliver* essay on postwar Europe.<sup>584</sup>

The new subjectivity that had developed in Austrian literature since the 1970s also saw the rise of anti-Heimatliteratur which has already been touched upon in my discussion on Ingeborg Bachmann. For the purpose of this chapter, I am interested in exploring how anti-Heimatliteratur moved into a new stage in the works of Christoph Ransmayr, where historical awareness and a critical agenda merge with the genre of utopia. Several tendencies of Austrian literature in the 1980s find themselves reflected in Ransmayr, such as the turn towards myth and ancient history, (for which Peter Handke has already served as an example), or the territorial expansion in the literary imaginary by means of travelogue and global literary settings, inspired by the contempt for a provincial Austria as well as by negotiations for joining the European Community.<sup>585</sup> In the case of Ransmayr, *Mitteleuropa* becomes the simultaneous projection screen for unfulfilled longings *and* for historical trauma, thus promoting transformation of the home through both utopian and dystopian visions. At the same time, literature in Austria was again, and perhaps for the first time since the 1930s, perceived as a means for activism as more and more authors turned away from the self-reflexivity or avant-garde writings of the 1970s to literary expressions of political engagement.<sup>586</sup> The most prominent catalyst for this development was the scandal around the 1986 Austrian elections. While former UN secretary general Kurt Waldheim was campaigning for Austrian presidency in 1986, it was revealed that he had systematically lied

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<sup>584</sup> See chapter 2 of this dissertation.

<sup>585</sup> Klaus Zeyringer, *Innerlichkeit und Öffentlichkeit. Österreichische Literatur der achtziger Jahre* (Tübingen: Francke Verlag, 1992), 94 -96.

<sup>586</sup> Zeyringer, *Innerlichkeit und Öffentlichkeit*, 96-98.

about his involvement in Nazi crimes as a Wehrmacht officer between 1942 and 1944. Even though a commission of historians did not find Waldheim directly responsible for war crimes, it determined that he had known of execution orders and had significantly contributed to their realization by providing military consultation.<sup>587</sup> The Waldheim affair revealed not only how deeply entrenched Austria was in silencing the past, but also exposed the strong undercurrent of Anti-Semitism in Austrian society, with Waldheim supporters interpreting the case as a Jewish conspiracy aimed to sully the country's honor.<sup>588</sup> In spite of antagonisms, he was elected and remained in office for six years, which sparked a new wave of Austria-criticism and provided a forum for the new Jewish writers, who became widely known in the years to follow and uniformly confirm the significance that this political paradigm shift had on their identity as Austrian Jews and intellectuals.<sup>589</sup> For non-Jewish writers, this increased attention on perpetrator responsibility forced them to confront the Jewish question as well – the process of critical self-examination that had been initiated in Germany with the student protests of 1968 thus began in Austria with a delay of two decades. This new weight on engagement put a definite end to the notion of Austrian literature as intrinsically apolitical, which both Claudio Magris and Ulrich Greiner had claimed in 1963 and 1979 respectively, and was also carried

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<sup>587</sup> Robert Wistrich, "The Waldheim Affair. Austria and the Legacy of the Holocaust." New York: American Jewish Committee, 1999, Accessed at <<http://www.ajc.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=ijITI2PHKoG&b=848899&ct=1054691>>, on May 30, 2012.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid.

<sup>589</sup> See Matthias Beilein, *86 und die Folgen. Robert Schindel, Robert Menasse und Doron Rabinovici im literarischen Feld Österreichs* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2008).

into the *Mitteleuropa* discourse in the late 1980s, thus defying Magris' concept of the "Habsburg Myth," in which retrospective utopia and political agency did not go together.<sup>590</sup>

I will juxtapose Ransmayr's deconstructions of *Mitteleuropa*, which grow out of Austria's literary confrontation with the Nazi period since 1986, to Dubravka Ugrešić's writings on the abuse of memory following the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the 1990s. Ugrešić clearly shows how the past is appropriated and edited to serve nationalist tendencies, and how the values of European humanism are debunked and obliterated both by helpless Western interlocutors and nationalist warmongers in the post-Yugoslav republics. Though they vary widely in literary style, with Ransmayr assuming a narrative epic tone and lyrical language that is in many ways reminiscent of Peter Handke or Thomas Bernhard, and Ugrešić employing ironic juxtaposition in the form of essayistic vignettes evocative of Danilo Kiš, they both pursue a common goal in their critical examination of collective memory. Both authors have been analyzed through the lens of postmodernism, due to their playful recombination of genres, their use of intertextuality, their reflections on (popular) myth, and their expressed skepticism towards the role of the author. But the postmodern elements in their writing do not lend themselves to the "freeplay of signifiers," assigned to postmodern literature, which has often been interpreted as morally relativist and politically disinterested.<sup>591</sup> In contrast, both Ransmayr and Ugrešić have embraced stances of ideological criticism in their roles as public intellectuals; seeking to debunk the injustice behind ideological systems such as fascism, nationalism, and capitalism, their works can therefore be read as a

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<sup>590</sup> Magris, *Habsburg Myth*, see also Ulrich Greiner, *Der Tod des Nachsommers*, 1-10.

<sup>591</sup> Peter V. Zima, *Moderne/Postmoderne* (Tübingen: Francke, 1997).

“confrontation of ideology with its own truth.”<sup>592</sup> Their reflections on Europe investigate how uncomfortable layers of memory overlap in a world that is increasingly fragmented and unstable. More than just a space relegated to the border and periphery, their texts envision Mitteleuropa as a field of ruins recuperated through nostalgia and myth. More than any of the other authors discussed so far, however, they treat nostalgia as a tool for critical reflection on the lost home, an approach which is also influenced by their own voluntary experiences of exile.<sup>593</sup> It would therefore be more appropriate to identify them under a category of art which the nostalgia scholar Svetlana Boym has called the “off-modern,” since it “explores the hybrids of past and present.”<sup>594</sup>

If at the beginning of the twentieth century modernists and avant-gardists defined themselves by disavowing nostalgia for the past, at the end of the twentieth century reflection on nostalgia might bring us to redefine critical modernity and its temporal ambivalence and cultural contradictions.<sup>595</sup>

According to Boym, off-modern art serves “as survival strategy” for exiles, “a way of making sense of the impossibility of homecoming.”<sup>596</sup> While Ugrešić acknowledges exile as the ultimate form of self-estrangement for a writer coming from a small nation (thus referencing Kiš), her writings also exemplify, as do Ransmayr’s, the state of permanent

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<sup>592</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, “Beitrag zur Ideologienlehre,” in *Gesammelte Schriften*, Band 8: *Soziologische Schriften I* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 465.

<sup>593</sup> Ugrešić has lived in voluntary exile in Amsterdam since 1992, after a media campaign was launched against her in the newly independent Croatia accusing her of being a traitor to her homeland. Even though Ransmayr is currently based in Vienna, his extensive travels around the world can be considered as a form of exile: he lived in Ireland for eleven years, and much of his writing has consequently taken on the form of travelogue. See for example *Auf dem Weg nach Surabaya* (1997), *Der Wolfsjäger. Drei polnische Duette* (2011) and also his most recent novel *Atlas eines ängstlichen Mannes* (2013).

<sup>594</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 30.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>596</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

refuge as part of the modern condition which Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer summed up so succinctly with the statement “home means having escaped.”<sup>597</sup> In fact, it is only through a spatial and temporal remove that a piecing together of the erstwhile home can be attempted, even if these attempts may be distorted by the fears and longings of the person who has left.

As members of the first postwar generation (Ransmayr is born in 1954, Ugrešić in 1949) they examine the effects of globalization and late capitalism to a much larger extent than any of the other authors discussed so far. There is an impetus toward admonishment, an atmosphere of almost eschatological gloom discernable in their texts. They are also faced with the problem of postmemory which is both tied to concrete family history but also a moral obligation to remember for a larger collective, the abandoned homeland. Because memory has become such a tainted endeavor in both Austria and the former Yugoslavia, their writing has to supplement that vacuum with both personal and collective memories as they are gathered, retrieved and excavated in literature. With regards to the *Mitteleuropa* discourse, both authors display an ambivalent stance: They are skeptical of *Mitteleuropa* as the project of political utopia as it presented itself in the 1980's; they read it, at least partially, as a form of reactionary longing for old Habsburg. On the other hand, their repeated envisioning of Central Europe as a space of oppression and destruction, of uneven power relationships and collective amnesia directly confirms essential aspects that were mapped out by Milan Kundera, György Konrád and Czesław Miłosz. In fact, Ugrešić borrows Konrád's concept of antipolitics in her acclaimed essay collection *The Culture of Lies*, and Ransmayr's semi-fantastic novel

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<sup>597</sup> “Heimat ist das Entronnensein.” See Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1997), 54.



*Morbus Kitahara* displays the kind of dystopian imaginary that Milosz specifically attributes to the Central European writer as an expression of political resistance. Both authors participated in the literary convention at Vilenica in Slovenia, which has already been mentioned as a forum for the Mitteleuropa debate, Ugrešić in 1989, Ransmayr in 1988.<sup>598</sup> In 1986, Ransmayr edited a literary anthology that can be read as a response to the debate on Central Europe at that time, *Im blinden Winkel. Nachrichten aus Mitteleuropa*, in which he also included a short story of his own.<sup>599</sup> The title already points to the uncertain topography and neglected status of this area, which, as was frequently suggested, had turned into a blind spot (blinder Winkel) for the West and needed to be rediscovered. Claiming this space of the blind spot and of the unseen subject, Ugrešić explores the role of Yugoslavia as the last European utopia as well as the influence that Habsburg imaginaries still have on that area (especially Croatia) in her writings, subjecting the values of civil engagement, plurality and *belles lettres* in the dissident debate to a thorough litmus test. Both authors demonstrate that the recurring question of *Mitteleuropa*, whether as a geopoetical or geopolitical construct, still brings to the surface myths and ghosts of European history. This is why between 1984, at the time Kundera's essay was first published, and 2004, when the second round of the EU enlargement incorporated all major eastern European countries, its role as historical catalyst has remained equally powerful, even if the individual foci of the discourse might have changed.

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<sup>598</sup>Vilenica prizes awarded between 1986 and 1990 at the official Vilenica website: <http://www.vilenica.si/arhiv/p/124/1/1#>.

<sup>599</sup> Christoph Ransmayr, ed., *Im blinden Winkel. Nachrichten aus Mitteleuropa* (Vienna: Christian Brandstätter, 1985).

## **Christoph Ransmayr – *Mitteleuropa* as the Debris of Austrian History**

In this section, I will examine different mirrors of *Mitteleuropa* that Ransmayr offers in his short prose collection *Der Weg nach Surabaya* (1997) (which also includes his short story “Przemysl,” originally included in *Im blinden Winkel. Nachrichten aus Mitteleuropa*) as well as in his dystopian novel *Morbus Kithara* (1995), which blends historical fact and fiction by presenting the reader with a nightmarish vision of postwar Europe.

I will start with Ransmayr’s short story “Przemysl,” which not only engages and parodies versions of the Habsburg myth in Austria, but can also be read as a literary response to the ideas set forth in Milan Kundera’s “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” which appeared in German translation in 1986, the same year that the story was published. “Przemysl” is set in a Galician town at the end of the First World War, shortly before the demise of the Habsburg Empire.<sup>600</sup> Based on historical events, it recounts the proclamation of the “free republic Przemysl” by a self-elected city council consisting of different ethnicities, for whom the end of imperial rule seems like blank slate to make up for all its unfulfilled promises. The subtitle defines it as “ein mitteleuropäisches Lehrstück,” i.e. a learning play coming from or concerning itself with Central Europe. Not only does this blur the genre distinctions of the text by utilizing a term Bertolt Brecht applied to his modernist drama, it also introduces a metafictional, self-conscious dimension. Brecht’s “Lehrstücke” were didactic pieces where the lines between audience and actors were suspended, the traditional mimetic objective of theater was questioned

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<sup>600</sup> Christoph Ransmayr, “Przemysl. Ein mitteleuropäisches Lehrstück,” in *Österreichische Erzähler des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Munich: Heyne, 1993), 460-465.

and the script could be adjusted at any time. From the beginning, we are thus alerted that “Przemysl” is about more than just a historical incident in 1918 Galicia, rather, it presents the idea of *Mitteleuropa* as a projection screen for recurring political and philosophical questions across time and space.

Already the title, bearing the name of the location where the story is set, exemplifies *Mitteleuropa*'s role as “the blind spot” of the continent: to the average western reader, the name will sound exotic, unknown, unpronounceable, Slavic, obscure, thus satisfying all the stereotypes that Austrian writers have traditionally demonstrated towards the fringes of the Habsburg empire. An early example is found in Karl Emil Franzos' immensely popular travel stories *Geschichten aus Halb-Asien* (1876), which were almost ethnographic accounts of the authors visits to the eastern provinces like Galicia and the Bukowina. Franzos, an assimilated Sephardic Jew based in Vienna, did not just enjoy ridiculing Ruthenian and Polish peasants, but also the in his view primitive and desolated Orthodox Jews of the eastern shtetl. Joseph Roth, who, unlike Franzos, had been raised in such a shtetl, was alarmed by this Orientalizing gaze and depicted the world of eastern Jewry much more sympathetically in his travelogue *Juden auf Wanderschaft* (1926-27). But there is another element to the choice of Przemyśl: The longest siege of the First World War took place in this Polish city, which turned it into a symbol for perseverance and an easy reference point for Habsburg nostalgia.<sup>601</sup> During the Second World War, it became a setting for division, displacement and atrocity once more. Occupied by the Germans in 1939, who cast out and murdered its Jewish population, one part of it was soon taken over by the Russians, the local river San

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<sup>601</sup> Franz Forstner, *Przemysl: Österreich-Ungarns bedeutendste Festung* (Vienna: Österreichischer Bundesverlag, 1987).

remaining the border until 1944. The German part of the city, called Deutsch-Przemysl, became a collection point for ethnic Germans who were ‘repatriated’ into the region between 1940 and 1942. Out of 20,000 Jews living in the city before 1939, about 250 survived. After the Soviets took control in 1944, many of the remaining Jews were either expelled or left the city by choice.<sup>602</sup>

The story opens as the Jewish Social democrat Herman Liebermann announces a golden age of “a peaceful coexistence of free, equal peoples in a diverse and democratic state” during the festive inauguration speech on the main square.<sup>603</sup> All of Przemysl’s ethnicities (Poles, Ukrainians, Jews, as well as temporarily stationed Croatian, Hungarian and Bohemian soldiers) Liebermann claims, “will find a happy, and more importantly common future in this republic.” His enthusiasm is put into a more critical perspective by the omniscient narrator, who comments from outside of the narrated time:

A pluralistic home, a family of nations, prospering countries by the Danube and the legacy of the Habsburg downfall, all in all: a free Central Europe. Liebermann was stirring up images of an old longing, which had adorned the speeches of many speakers of the Austro-Hungarian past and with which many speakers and writers of the Central European future would adorn their speeches and writings as well.<sup>604</sup>

The pronounced emphasis of the stereotypical Central European Jewish intellectual, embodied in Liebermann (a writer of speeches) already points to the satirical objective of this short text. The narrator is able to observe both the past euphoria for *Mitteleuropa* and

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<sup>602</sup> See the entry on “Przemysl” in the Virtual Jewish Library, [http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud\\_0002\\_0016\\_0\\_16154.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/judaica/ejud_0002_0016_0_16154.html). Last accessed February 28, 2015.

<sup>603</sup> This character is based on the historical figure of H. Lieberman, a Polish Jew who was an active member in Przemysl’s Polish Socialist party (PPS).

<sup>604</sup> Ransmayr, “Przemysl”, 460. My translation.

its current fervent discussion among Eastern European dissidents. This is why he juxtaposes Liebermann's utopian evocations with the cynical retorts of a Czech military physician, Jaroslav Souček, who prophetically assesses that the power of nationalism will always prevail over collective ideas:

The Central European people want neither a dynastic nor a democratic multiethnic state [...] they simply want their own, autonomous, dull little nation states, their own flailing industries, corrupt parliaments, and ridiculously dressed armies. [...] The only thing this marvelous family of nations has in common is their willingness to gang up on the Jews at every opportunity they can find. Pogroms are the only collective undertaking this family can be bothered with. [...] They remain blind to each other; blind and stupid. The nation! Oh Liebermann, what nonsense. But as of now it will remain modern to promote this nonsense, along with the belief in a personal glorious history, the belief in a uniquely shaped path leading a pack of monkeys to a contentious nation state. In the Europe that you're talking about, my dear Sir, Bohemia is located by the sea and Trieste is up in the mountains. Your speeches are not keeping up with the times. And the times, Mr. Democrat, are certainly not keeping up with your speeches.<sup>605</sup>

This passage contains much more than an internal dispute between two fictional characters. Its interreferential and intertextual quality makes it an evident jab at the ongoing discourse on Mitteleuropa. In his famous essay, Kundera had highlighted the Central European Jews as the "cultural cement" of the region but had not expounded on the profound and long history of Anti-Semitism in the Central European space. Ransmayr, by contrast, whose writing often raises the problem of suppressed collective memory, presents the hatred towards Jews as the only common regional denominator. Moreover, Kundera displays a latently Romantic view of nationalism. He considers it a useful counter-force against Soviet Pan Slavism, while Ransmayr, foregrounds its fierce, expansionist implications that had significantly contributed to the horrors of World War II and the genocide of the European Jews. Kundera juxtaposes the idea of the small,

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<sup>605</sup> Ransmayr, "Przemysl," 462-463. My translation.

unique and threatened nations comprising the patchwork of Central Europe to the anonymous Soviet landmass, “a space so vast entire nations are swallowed up in it.”<sup>606</sup> The voice of Souček here is the voice of skeptical historicism: Whether in 1918 or 1983, those who invoke Mitteleuropa as a revolutionary idea ignore the fact that it was also appropriated by the very same repressive forces they are reacting to. Mitteleuropa in this passage is a construct of literature, of beautiful metaphors and the enticing imagery that comes with them, passed on from poet to poet, and bearing little resemblance to reality. Specifically, Ransmayr alludes to two postwar authors who had evoked their own version of Mitteleuropa: One is Ingeborg Bachmann’s 1964 poem “Bohemia lies by the sea,” in which she had evoked the Habsburg province of Bohemia as a transnational, borderless utopia where the lyrical I experiences a sort of homecoming and merging with their origins. Inspired by the stage directions for Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* Bohemia is transported to sea. The image of the Italian city of Trieste relegated to the mountains is a reference to a 1983 book by Claudio Magris, in which Trieste is conjured up as another paradigmatic Central European literary space that is still determined by its multiethnic Habsburg past. Both authors, it is suggested, distort actual geographies by creating retrospective utopias. The example of Magris is particularly striking due to his own criticism of “the Habsburg myth” in Austrian literature. What Ransmayr wants to foreground here is the irony with which both the Social democrat Lieberman in Przemysl and Magris contribute to the maintenance of the Habsburg myth while they simultaneously proclaim its deconstruction.

The Mitteleuropa enthusiast Liebermann, as Souček proclaims, is a relic of the

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<sup>606</sup> Kundera, “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” 4.

past that will fall prey to the violent whirlwind of modernity. There is an additional intertextual layer: By placing a Mitteleuropa skeptic next to a Mitteleuropa idealist, Ransmayr is echoing a similar scene from Joseph Roth's Habsburg elegy *Radetzky* *march*, whose mixture of melancholy and satire had already intrigued Bachmann. During a celebration shortly before the beginning of World War I, the young officer Carl Joseph von Trotta overhears the Polish count Chojnicki articulate a passionate diatribe against the dual monarchy:

This empire is bound to fall apart. As soon as our emperor shuts his eyes, we will shatter into a thousand pieces. The Balkans will be more powerful than we are. All peoples will establish their own dirty little nation states, and even the Jews will proclaim a king of Palestine. You can already smell the stench of Democrats in Vienna, I can't stand the Ringstrasse anymore. The workers are carrying red flags and don't want to work anymore. The mayor of Vienna is nothing but a modest janitor.<sup>607</sup>

Later on in Roth's novel, a similarly gloomy statement is followed by the announcement of the assassination of Duke Franz Ferdinand, which triggers the beginning of the First World War. The celebration turns rowdy, the different ethnicities quarrel with each other, and a funeral march is played. The situation of interethnic unrest described in Ransmayr's story mirrors this scene: During Liebermann's speech, a few Ukrainians start a commotion, which is the prelude to the seizing of the city by Ukrainian forces a few days later, ending all dreams of a multiethnic free republic. When the Polish military manages to take back the city soon thereafter and integrates it into the newly independent Polish nation state, they do so by referring to the myth of the nation, just as the Ukrainians had done before them: "Przemysl had always been Polish. And Przemysl would always stay Polish." As Soucek has accurately predicted, the ultimate victim of

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<sup>607</sup> Roth, *Radetzky* *marsch*, 101.

this, as with any Central European tug-of war is found in the Jews, in Przemysl's case "Ludvik Uiberall, a Pole of the Mosaic confession," who is killed in the commotion by accident. His tragicomic death has symbolic significance, as his last name ("überall" meaning everywhere) highlights the paradigmatic nature of such losses. In the perpetual repetition of history, the specifics of conflict become negligible, and the only consistency can be found in the ever-same violent results. Towards the end, Ransmayr admonishes those who are prone to succumb to the poetic pathos of this fictionalized historical account, rather than the didactic lesson, which it is meant to convey:

Granted, the evening festivities of this All Saints Day might have run a different course: perhaps the republic was proclaimed without the sound of brass music, perhaps the cedars around the Ring square were already gone at that time, perhaps the Czech physician was not called Souček, but rather Palacky or something else, and maybe it was not carters, but rather members of the Sitsch, the paramilitary Ukrainian firefighters in uniform who had started a fight with the torch-bearers.<sup>608</sup>

The Cedar trees or the brass music (also a reference to Joseph Roth) are part of the fleeting, impalpable "spirit" of Mitteleuropa just as the supposedly flowering Danubian nations. Through his didactic prose miniature that might have been as well taken from Robert Musil or Joseph Roth, Ransmayr responds to Kundera's claim that the minor nations in Central Europe "represent the wrong side of this history; they are its victims and outsiders." Ransmayr answers this by pointing to the self-destructive dynamics of *Mitteleuropa*,<sup>609</sup> where the layers of different ideologies and totalitarianisms permeate the distinction of minor and major nations. Central Europe, in his eyes, is neither a tragedy nor community of fate (both terms used by Kundera) but rather paradigm of history, replayed through a polyphony of voices across time and space.

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<sup>608</sup> Ransmayr, "Przemysl," 464.

<sup>609</sup> Kundera, "Tragedy of Central Europe," 8.



More than twenty years later, Ransmayr followed up his prose miniature about Mitteleuropa with an even clearer rejection of political utopias: in his 2008 novel *Morbus Kitahara*, he paints a science-fiction like vision of what the defeated German and Austrian territories might have looked like if the Allied forces had established a reign of vengeance after the end of the Second World War, transforming great parts of it into a de-industrialized wasteland. The novel juxtaposes imaginaries of mythical characters and landscapes to barely camouflaged real historical events and places. The result is a fractured and haunted Central European landscape, the foundation of which is already laid out in “Przemysl.” Contrary to what Kundera and other visionaries of the 1980s had hoped for, Ransmayr hereby demonstrates that the yearning for the Central European dream of equality and diversity was not fulfilled with the end of the Cold War. In the world of *Morbus Kitahara*, Central Europe is still a battlefield of memories and ideologies. Former camp inmates are now torturers, victims have turned into perpetrators, and the liberators have assumed the roles of colonizers. The Central European cycle of violence is continued: While “Przemysl” ends with the death of Ludvik Uiberall, *Morbus Kitahara* opens with the image of three dead bodies sprawled onto the scorched earth of Brazil, where the protagonists have escaped to after Central Europe has been turned into a giant military testing ground. In *Morbus Kitahara*, globalization has taken a different turn, the first and third world have switched places, what was once marginal is now central, another important trope of the Mitteleuropa debate – Central Europe is populated by barbarians, while Brazil has become a popular emigration destination. Ransmayr’s gloomy reflection of Central Europe is very much in agreement with a tendency towards dystopia that Czeslaw Milosz attested to the Central European writer:

Is his world apocalyptic? Not in the sense that the minds of many writers in the west are. It looks as if he has rejected meditation on the possible effects of nuclear war as futile and has moved the very possibility of war into the realm of the absurd joke [...] But dark visions in a different, and perhaps deeper sense, seem to be a specialty of Central European writers.<sup>610</sup>

The “deeper sense” that Milosz identifies here is the historical reality that shines through the tropes of distortion and exaggeration inherent in such “apocalyptic” writing. Following the tradition of both utopian and dystopian writing, which is usually set in an undefined future time and in an isolated geography, Ransmayr’s narrative creates the impression that this is not quite the time and the space that the reader is familiar with. However, the real artifice of *Morbus Kitahara* lies in the tension that it establishes between the familiar and the uncanny: mythical and archetypal structures that seem to be beyond time are superimposed on hybrid topographies that evoke, in their shadow form, historically concrete forms of injustice. This dystopian collage puts Greek myth next to the Holocaust, blends Austria and Germany into one giant wasteland connected by the Alps, and subjects it to the oppressive conditions of the eastern bloc.

The landscapes of *Morbus Kitahara* bears resemblance to our world, but they are transported to a dystopian setting: leather clad bands of robbers terrorize the remaining settlements (the great cities have been abandoned), electricity has become a rare good, television and radio have been abolished and the people survive by returning to ancient professions and countertrade. Moor, the mountain village where the novel is set, has been cut off from all public transportation when the rail tracks were removed after the end of

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<sup>610</sup> Milosz is referring to the writers Karel Čapek and Stanislaw Witkiewicz, 105.

“the Great War” – a punishment designed by the victorious forces in order to send the whole country “back to the stone age.” Memory is reduced to meaningless rituals of repentance, triggering only hatred and spite in the inhabitants who are forced to perpetually commemorate a past which they do not understand. Against the background of this gloomy topography, the stories of three lives are being told: Bering, a child of the first post war generation, born in the last days of the war, Ambras, a former camp prisoner, and Lily, the daughter of a war criminal who was lynched by camp survivors.

According to Erika Gottlieb, the major theme of dystopian fiction is the forfeiture of justice<sup>611</sup> – in Ransmayr’s novel, questions of guilt, regret and retribution arise in connection to the injustice committed in Austria during the Nazi period. The fictional village Moor is modeled after his childhood town Roitham near Gmunden in Upper Austria, located at the Traunsee, which was close to an outpost of the Nazi labor camp Mauthausen. In an interview, Ransmayr expresses his profound uneasiness not just with the geographical proximity to the camp site, but his own ignorance about it: “Ich bin an einem Ende des Sees zur Schule gegangen, und am anderen Ende war der Steinbruch von Ebensee, ein ehemaliges Außenlager von Mauthausen.”<sup>612</sup> Although the site of atrocity was present and visible, its history was not talked about – in a postwar climate where Nazi-allied Austria was viewed as an occupied victim rather than collaborator in genocide, different memories had priority. This is why the area in question would display a sign commemorating the visit of the emperor to the local spa resort, but would fail to

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<sup>611</sup>Erika Gottlieb, *Dystopian Fiction East and West: Universe of Terror and Trial* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), 35- 36.

<sup>612</sup>Interview with Sigrid Löffler, “Das Thema hat mich bedroht,” in *Die Erfindung der Welt. Zum Werk von Christoph Ransmayr*, ed. Uwe Wittstock (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1997), 214.

mention the death of more than ten thousands victims of the former labor camp nearby.<sup>613</sup>

Ransmayr learned about the camps from his father, who took him there on excursions, not from school officials. Ransmayr's writing about history follows an ethical impulse – faced with the paradoxical coexistence of either uninvolved acknowledgement of the death camps or their apologetic denial, of prescribed memory on one hand and deliberate amnesia on the other, there is the option of writing as an ethical act:

Die einen sagen: Das war halt. Die anderen sagen: Das war nicht. Aber wenn ich das, was war und was dokumentiert ist, in einen erzählerischen Raum übertrage, in meine Geschichte, und sie mir zunächst selber erzähle, dann erscheint mir alles noch einmal und so wirklich wie noch nie. Im Erzählen – anders als im Dokumentieren – bin ich zu einer ganz anderen Deutlichkeit, Schärfe und Eindringlichkeit imstande.<sup>614</sup>

Unlike other chroniclers of Central Europe (for instance Danilo Kiš and Aleksandar Tisma), Ransmayr places the literary imaginary above documentation; he is not interested in creating the impression of veracity. Instead he affirms the concreteness that arises when history is mediated through a subjective work of art. It is important to point out here, however, that his short fiction distinguishes itself considerably from his novelistic writing in this respect. Though “Przemysl” contains metafictional elements, it includes historical references that also suggest a documentary, investigative intention. This may be attributed to the fact that many of his short stories were first written for and published in

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<sup>613</sup>Ransmayr as quoted by Carl Niekerk, “Vom Kreislauf der Geschichte,” in Wittstock, *Die Erfindung der Welt*, 168.

<sup>614</sup>Christoph Ransmayr, Interview with Sigrid Löffler, in Wittstock, *Die Erfindung der Welt*, 217.

travel magazines, a medium where a documentary, even slightly ethnographic style seems appropriate.<sup>615</sup>

Ransmayr's poetics places personal insight above didactic intention. The effort to understand human suffering needs to be an individual one, since any collective attempt to instill feelings of guilt or empathy is bound to fail: “Einsicht, Reue..Bewusstsein ist etwas höchst Individuelles. Aufklärung findet vor allem im einzelnen Kopf statt.” (218). Instead of generic prescriptions, the purpose of storytelling is consequently to represent the uniqueness of human experience, “das Unwiederholbare, Unverwechselbare am Einzelfall [...] und ihn vielleicht gerade dadurch zum Beispiel zu machen.” (219). This allows for true empathy of which the public memory discourse in Austria is sorely lacking, even after the Waldheim affair and shift in consciousness:

[...] natürlich hat mich auch die empörende Ungerechtigkeit beschäftigt daß immer noch und immer wieder vom Schlußstrichziehen, vom Vergessen und Vergeben geredet wurde, während mitten unter diesen Rednern und Beschwörern und Besänftigern Leute lebten und immer noch leben, die diese Wahl eben nicht haben, die eben nicht vergessen und keine Schlußstriche ziehen und auch keine Gräben zuschütten können, weil sie immer noch an den Folgen ihrer Lagerzeit, ihrer Folterungen leiden und manchmal erst jetzt, in *unseren* Tagen, zugrunde gehen an dem, was ihnen angetan wurde.<sup>616</sup>

Here Ransmayr is reiterating crucial characteristics of the of the Second Austrian Republic: the rhetoric of a clean slate, the belief in a progressive future largely divested

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<sup>615</sup> Ransmayr's *Der Weg nach Surabaya*, where “Przemysl” was re-published in 1997, contains a majority of texts that were first published in travel magazines such as *Geo*, *TransAtlantik* and *Merian*.

<sup>616</sup> Christoph Ransmayr, *Geständnisse eines Touristen. Ein Verhör* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2004), 125.

of the past, legitimized by a nonsensical, abstract practice of forgiveness -- who should forgive whom, one wonders? Being born after the Second World War, however, his observations are marked by an identification with the past that is made possible only by the temporal remove. In an act of postmemorial investment, he maintains that the trauma of the Nazi period, communicated through the locations where it was caused reaches beyond the victims: “Ich habe mit erträglichen eigenen *und* unerträglichen fremden Erinnerungen gelebt – an den Steinbruch am See, an alles, was dort geschehen ist.”<sup>617</sup> Being exposed to the spaces of memory facilitates both empathy and consequently responsibility. To claim this empathy for the descendants of the perpetrators is a daring gesture that the first generation of critical postwar writers in Austria such as Ingeborg Bachmann, Elfriede Jelinek, Thomas Bernhard and even Peter Handke would have found morally problematic. But it is based on Ransmayr’s effort to defy easy categorizations without becoming apologetic. Therefore his intention while writing *Morbus Kitahara*, he claims, was to make all three main protagonists equally relatable as sharers in the consequences of injustice: “Täter hier, Opfer da – und ich als Leser oder als Erzähler immer auf der Seite des Guten, des Wahren, der Aufklärung: So blödsinnig einfach ist die Welt eben nicht. Weder die wirkliche noch die erzählte.”<sup>618</sup> This statement could be easily misunderstood by those who are not familiar with Ransmayr’s anti-ideological stance, but his rejection of a “simple” view of the world is merely an admonishment not to repeat the dominant dichotomy on which collective Austrian identity had been based until the 1980s: Austrians as a victims, Nazi Germany as the perpetrator.

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<sup>617</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>618</sup> Ibid., 121.

How then can memory be preserved and justice achieved without succumbing to indoctrination? *Morbus Kitahara*'s dystopian narrative confronts this predicament head-on, by presenting the reader with the consequences of a memory politics carried to the extreme. It is based on a real scenario of retribution: Shortly before the end of the Second World War, United States Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau Jr. had presented a plan for eliminating Germany's capacity for warfare. Contrary to what Hitler Germany's propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels claimed, it did not include the transformation of Germany into an agricultural state, but focused on the deindustrialization of the Ruhr and Saar area (where most of the weapon industry had flourished).<sup>619</sup> By evoking a pre-modern society as the result of a radical Morgenthau plan on one hand, and a futuristic, dystopian world of scarcity and occupation on the other, Ransmayr's mixed lexical inventory causes a rupture in historical continuity, a fusion of time(s).<sup>620</sup> As a punishment for having committed unspeakable crimes during the Great War, Central Europe has both regressed, fallen back in time, and reached an apocalyptic future or "end time". Ransmayr employed the same interweaving of temporal planes in his utopian novel *The Last World* (1988), in which he blends characters and locations from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* with Rome under the reign of Augustus, but then deconstructs the impression of an antique setting with elements of modern civilization, as well as allusions to the eastern bloc. The shabby town of Tomis, where the narrative is set, "gives the impression of a decadent Balkan town of the twentieth century, of the years

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<sup>619</sup> See Bernd Greiner, *Die Morgenthau-Legende: Zur Geschichte eines umstrittenen Plans* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 1995).

<sup>620</sup> Carl Niekerk, "Vom Kreislauf der Geschichte," in *Die Erfindung der Welt*, 171.

not long before the collapse of the Soviet regimes.”<sup>621</sup> Tomis, the historical city of Ovid’s exile, is located in present day Constanta in Romania, and how clearly the book was understood as a political allegory can be seen in the fact that its translation was censored and ultimately banned under Ceausescu.<sup>622</sup> As in *Morbus Kitahara*, the genre of utopia in *The Last World* is used as a weapon against totalitarian power, only thinly veiled by the cloak of antiquity and myth.

The landscapes that Ransmayr presents in *Morbus Kitahara* bear the same anachronisms of time and space. They do not merely echo the field of ruins that Austria had become after the Second World War but move beyond that into a scenario of nuclear war and biblical prophecy. The birth of Bering during the bombing of Moor is set against the background of a Central European apocalypse:

Zwischen schimmeligen Fässern brachte sie [Bering’s Mutter] dann ihren zweiten Sohn um Wochen zu früh in eine Welt, die in das Zeitalter der Vulkane zurückzufallen schien: In den Nächten flackerte das Land unter einem roten Himmel. Am Tag verfinsterten Phosphorwolken die Sonne, und in Schuttwüsten machten die Bewohner von Höhlen Jagd auf Tauben, Eidechsen und Ratten. Aschenregen fiel. Und Berings Vater, der Schmied von Moor, war fern.<sup>623</sup>

Several decades later, when Bering, the son of a soldier has become an adult, Moor, just like the whole mountainous area of the “highlands” of which it is part, is still a wasteland that suffers under the oppressive regime of the occupier. Marked by decay and depravity, Wild West justice and untamed violence, Moor remains stuck in the past -- both the past

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<sup>621</sup> Andreas N. Michalopoulos, “Ovid’s Last Wor(l)d,” in *Two Thousand Years of Solitude. Exile After Ovid*, ed. Jennifer Ingleheart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 2.

<sup>622</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>623</sup> Christoph Ransmayr, *Morbus Kithahara* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2008), 9-10. All further quotes of to the novel refer to this edition.



of its transgressions, which is replayed time and again, but also in a generic, amorphous ‘pastness’ associated with pre-civilization. Constant commemoration is part of the mission of re-education, but so is the abstract belief in a rebuilt future, as the propaganda disseminated by the military administration shows: “*Willkommen...Heimat in Trümmern...Zukunft....und Mut fassen!*,”<sup>(24)</sup> Slogans that might as well be taken from communist programs meet biblical commandments: “*Auf unseren Feldern wächst die Zukunft, Du sollst nicht töten.*”<sup>624</sup> The name of the American President Lyndon Porter Stellamour, who thinks up these statements which are taught at school, is printed on posters all over Moor<sup>625</sup> and is feared to an almost religious degree as “the one and only true name of vengeance,” “*der einzige und wahre Name der Vergeltung,*” In the same biblical vein, Stellamour is also called a judge “*Richter*” and scholar “*Gelehrter*”<sup>626</sup> to underline his role as bringer of justice and civilized culture to the morally corrupted citizens of Moor.

The language of imposed repentance does not only permeate every aspect of life in the occupied zone, but becomes a physical, threatening entity when a larger than life inscription at the quarry is installed, reminding every inhabitant and visitor of the prisoners who were murdered there or perished as a result of forced labor, torture and malnutrition in the adjoining death camp:

HIER LIEGEN

ELF TAUSENDNEUNHUNDERTDREIUNDSIEBZIG TOTE

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<sup>624</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid., 38-39.

<sup>626</sup> Ibid., 38.

ERSCHLAGEN  
VON DEN EINGEBORENEN DIESES LANDES  
WILLKOMMEN IN MOOR <sup>627</sup>

Every letter, symbolically, is the size of a man. By turning the whole mountain into a monument (“...das ganze Gebirge in ein Denkmal verwandelt<sup>628</sup>”) and imbuing the terror of remembering with elemental power, the shame and fate of Moor is literally 'set in stone'. The “indigenous people,” (die Eingeborenen), the Barbarians of Moor, are charged collectively with the responsibility for every single death at the labor camp. The intention of the administration is not true education but punishment by sending the society of the “highlands” (“Hochland”)<sup>629</sup> back to a pre-industrial era or “stone age” (“Zurück! Zurück mit euch! Zurück in die Steinzeit!”): “*Armeen von Hirten und Bauern*”, “*keine Fabriken mehr, keine Turbinen und Eisenbahnen*”, “*aus Kriegstreibern Sautreiber und Spargelstecher*,” “*Jaucheträger aus den Generälen.*”<sup>630</sup> As Moor is first linguistically, then physically transported back in time (“Unaufhaltsam glitt Moor durch die Jahre zurück”<sup>631</sup>), old professions and forms of address are revived. Individuality becomes obsolete, and the identity of Moor's citizens is reduced to their occupation. When Bering first introduces himself to his new employer Ambras (whom he addresses in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural with “Ihr” and the royal title “Exzellenz” an outdated form

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<sup>627</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>628</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>629</sup> The mountaneous area which Moor belongs to and which is cut off from the “Tiefland,” where technology, for unknown reasons, is not outlawed, and life after war picks up normally.

<sup>630</sup> Ransmayr, *Morbus Kitahara*, 41-42.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid., 43.

compared to the modern 'Sie'<sup>632</sup>), a former camp prisoner and now feared administrator of the quarry, he does not even mention his first name but simply identifies himself as “the blacksmith” (“...*Exzellenz, ich bin der Schmied*”<sup>633</sup>). Deindividualization is carried to mythological proportion with the use of the definite article, conjuring up the blacksmith as cultural archetype throughout history. Names have an important function in *Morbus Kitahara*: Bering is not just the blacksmith (as is his father, no distinction is made) but also “bird man” “Vogelmensch” and the “crier of Moor” (“Schreier von Moor”, because of a rare gift to imitate bird song and his affinity for birds), Ambras, who lives in an abandoned villa with a pack of wild dogs becomes the “dog king” “der Hundekönig,” and Lily, a child of war like Bering is called “the huntress” (“die Jägerin”) and the Brazilian (“die Brasilianerin.”) In *Morbus Kitahara* such archetypal references fulfill the double function of confirming and estranging a hermeneutical consistency in the narrative.

Rather than official monuments, what contributes to the process of memory and historical self-awareness in war-marked Moor are ruinous locations scattered around the village. They rupture the façade of ahistoricity and myth by their palimpsestic presence, since they conjure a history of destruction. They can be accessed not just by visiting the sites, but more importantly through the narratives of survivors who evoke them. The quarry at the lake where prisoners once toiled and died is such a time rupturing site of memory. Ransmayr again suspends set coordinates of time and space, overlapping the outpost of Mauthausen with another concentration camp, the fortress of Breendonk in Belgium. He assigns a particular method of torture that is historically known to have

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<sup>632</sup> Ibid., 82-83.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid., 83.

been carried out in Breendonk, the suspension of prisoners from the ceiling until their shoulders got dislocated, to the quarry of Moor. This practice was first described by Jean Améry in his autobiographical account “Die Tortur”, but was also referenced by Ingeborg Bachmann in “Drei Wege zum See” and in W.G. Sebald’s novel *Austerlitz*.<sup>634</sup> More than just imbuing his dystopian fiction with some realist horror, Ransmayr’s reference to Jean Améry places him in the critical tradition of postwar German speaking literature, since both Bachmann and Sebald depict a European topography that is fractured and haunted by the legacy of atrocity it seeks to overcome. In *Morbus Kitahara*, it is the former Ebensee prisoner Ambras who relates his experience of torture to Bering, when he asks why his “master” cannot lift his arms. Bering responds by telling the story of his physical assault in horrifying because highly evocative language. The visceral acoustic impression of torture is already paraphrased by Sebald (following Améry),<sup>635</sup> but Ransmayr adds empathetic impact by turning it into a personal witness account that is narrated by an actual survivor:

Das macht ein Geräusch, das du, wenn überhaupt, nur aus der Metzgerei kennst, wenn der Schlachter einem Kadaver die Knochen auseinanderreißt oder ein Gelenk gegen seine Beugerichtung bricht, und das hört sich bei dir nicht viel anders an. Aber dieses Krachen und Splintern hörst du ganz allein, denn alle anderen – die Schweine, die den Strick noch in den Fäusten halten, an dem sie dich hochgezogen haben; deine Mitgefangenen, die dich noch unversehrt von unten anstarren und morgen oder schon in der nächsten Minute auch hier oben pendeln werden – alle anderen hören nur dein Geheul.”<sup>636</sup>

What makes Ambras witness account so harrowing is not just the graphic comparison to the butcher shop, but the direct involvement of the listener, who becomes, through the

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<sup>634</sup> Jean Améry, “Die Tortur,” in *Jenseits von Schuld und Sühne. Bewältigungsversuche eines Überwältigten* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1966) and W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2003) 42.

<sup>636</sup> Ransmayr, *Morbus Kitahara*, 175.

use of the personal pronoun “du” (instead of “ich”) one with the victim: “das *du*...kennst”, “das hört sich bei *dir* nicht viel anders an”, “ an dem sie *dich* hochgezogen haben.” In his compelling identification, Ransmayr’s treatment of the witness here resembles that of Aleksandar Tisma’s protagonist in his short story “Without a Cry.”<sup>637</sup> The difference is that here the dialogue between witness/victim and a descendant of the perpetrators leads not just to the vicarious experience of victimhood but has an enlightening effect. For the first time in his life Bering, who has become frustrated with receiving secondary knowledge through army officials, feels empathetic unsettlement. Without direct human transference, no meaningful link to the past can be established, and even the survivors become identical with the murdered if they are not given a chance to speak:

[...] auch auf den Parties im Steinbruch [...] waren die *Befreiten* so stumm und gesichtslos geblieben, dass Bering und mit ihm viele von Moors Kindern manchmal glaubten, die Gefangenen des Barackenlagers hätten[...] niemals ein anderes Gesicht gehabt als die starren Züge jener Toten, die man auf Plakaten der Armee nackt und aufeinandergeworfen [...] in grossen Gruben liegen sah [...]. Es hatte lange gedauert bis Bering uns seinesgleichen begriffen, daß nicht alle Unglücklichen aus dem Barackenlager in der Erde oder in den Backsteinöfen [...] verschwunden waren, sondern daß sich einige bis in die Gegenwart gerettet hatten und nun in der gleichen Welt lebten wie sie selbst.<sup>638</sup>

The mass reproduction of pictures of atrocities has a numbing effect on the children of the next generation because they cannot see any relevance for their own lives in them. Similarly, the staging of labor camp scenes as ordered by Major Elliot's administration, in which Moor's citizens are forced to imitate the suffering of the internees remains nothing but an empty gesture, “düsteres Theater” to them.<sup>639</sup> They are so used to the landscape of

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<sup>637</sup> See chapter 3.

<sup>638</sup> Ransmayr, *Morbus Kitahara*, 176.

<sup>639</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

ruins Moor has become that they do not consider it, as the occupiers do, a deliberately neglected 'museum of past atrocities' – instead it has become a perpetual present. As such it does not offer any new insights and no contrast between 'now' and 'then':

Was Moors Kinder auf den Schautafeln und in den *Geschichtskursen* des Friedensbringers sahen und hörten, das war doch bloß Moor – eingesunkene Baracken, die muschelbesetzten Pfähle des Dampferstegs, der Steinbruch, Ruinen. Das kannten sie.<sup>640</sup>

In *Morbus Kitahara* the ability to access and process information about the past appropriately is linked to the trope of sight: the postwar generation's failure to integrate Moor's violent history into their present leads to a fracture of perception, as exemplified through the figure of Bering. When the blacksmith is driving Ambras and Lily home one night, he is puzzled by potholes in the road – only after a few minutes does he realize that the 'holes' he perceives are actually symptoms of his failing eye sight. On a trip to the civilized "Tiefland," a paramedic who specializes in visual disorders reveals that such gaps and distortions of vision befall men who are obsessed with some topic or lurking threat, typically soldiers or snipers. He is confused to find it with someone as seemingly disengaged as Bering: "Worauf starrt einer wie du? Was will einem wie dir nicht aus dem Kopf? Ich habe solche Flecken in den Augen von Infanteristen und Scharfschützen gesehen [...] die sich aus Angst oder Haß oder eiserner Wachsamkeit ein Loch ins eigene Auge starren [...]." His advice is to let go: "Mach dich nicht verrückt. Was immer es ist, lass es los. Starr anderswo hin."<sup>641</sup> He does not know that Bering's obsession is his lack of identity, that he feels betrayed by his heritage of guilt ("Bering hasste sein Erbe"<sup>642</sup>)

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<sup>640</sup> Ibid..

<sup>641</sup> Ibid., 349-350.

<sup>642</sup> Ibid., 51.

and that the impending loss of vision is just a result of the figurative and actual 'blindness' surrounding him. Bering knows that neither his father, a blacksmith and soldier during the war, nor his mother, a religious fanatic who hallucinates encounters with the virgin Mary, can enlighten him on the events of “the Great War” and the role of his own life in its aftermath. Both resort to different escapisms: after an accident has destroyed his eye sight almost entirely, Bering's father imagines himself back in the war as a soldier in the North African desert, first only episodically, until he loses his mind towards the end of the novel and reenacts his past, fighting imaginary maneuvers in the mountains. When his mother witnesses Bering killing one of the vandals that terrorize the “Tiefeland” in self defense, she shuts herself away in the basement to expiate the sin that her son has brought upon the family. Authentic guilt and regret that are not linked to political or religious dogma are not felt by either one of them – Bering's deteriorating vision is therefore a reflection of his family's inability to see the truth and failure to overcome their own myth of victimhood.

Two mythological figures are combined in Bering: one is the Greek god Hephaestus, associated with craftsmanship and warfare, the other is that of Tiresias, a blind prophet of Apollo. One version of the Greek myth has it that he was blinded by Athena after he stumbled onto her bathing naked. His mother, Chariclo, a nymph of Athena, implored the goddess to undo her curse, but she decided to make up for his loss by giving him the ability to understand birdsong, and thus the gift of augury.<sup>643</sup> Bering's early fascination with birds and later love for machines and technology are attempts to break free of this mentality of incarceration. Embittered due to the knowledge and

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<sup>643</sup>Robert Graves, “The Nature and Deeds of Athena,” in *The Greek Myths I*. (New York: G. Braziller, 1957), 25.

progress that is denied to him, Bering tries to appropriate a victim and perpetrator identity at the same time. He knows that his father, in the eyes of the victors, is a perpetrator. When he kills his assailant, he is performing an experiment, putting himself in the murderer's shoes: *So ist das, so ist das also, so ist das...*(58). Later, when he meets a chicken thief on his trip to the “Tiefeland” with Lily, he imagines himself as a defender of justice, the slaughtered chickens being a symbol of his childhood. As he shoots the thief from behind, he is suddenly overcome by a vision of his master Ambras, the only human victim that he has ever been able to relate to: “Bering, das Auge am Zielrohr, ist ganz nah an seinem Opfer – und sieht *Ambras*.[...] Ob Ambras wohl an der Stelle des Getroffenen dort seine Arme ebenso hoch über den Kopf erhoben hätte? Ob ihn der Schuss befreit hätte von seinem Gebrechen? Für immer befreit.”<sup>644</sup> Bering's life (and also death) represents the failure of vision in the sense of insight and *Anschauung* – in the end he dies because borrowed identities are not enough to sustain him, because he clings (metaphorically and literally, as will be explained) to the world of the victim Ambras.

*Morbus Kitahara* demonstrates a didactics of historical guilt gone wrong, since the inhabitants of Moor refute an indoctrination through the occupiers. Both victims and perpetrators are punished in this scenario, only by other means. The former camp inmate Ambras is overwhelmed by visions of his past to such a degree that they lead to his eventual death. Some of the most gripping scenes in *Morbus Kitahara* are those which recount Ambras' memories of suffering in the camps, but none are as visceral as the description when his Jewish partner gets deported, literally torn from his bedside by the fascist authorities. After his liberation, he only manages to find her sister; his lover has

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<sup>644</sup> Ransmayr, *Morbus Kitahara*, 313.



disappeared and has probably been murdered. What remains is the last camp letter with a formulaic assurance: “*Ich bin gesund. Es geht mir gut.*” Ransmayr identifies this sentence, which is commemorated in the museum at the Mauthausen site, as the ultimate act of terror:

Und im Lager Mauthausen, auf einer Glastafel im Museum, herauskopiert aus vielen Briefen der Lagerpost, steht in ebenso vielen Handschriften dieser eine deutsche! Satz, der in allen persönlichen Nachrichten eingefügt werden *mußte*, die aus dieser Hölle nach Italien, Polen oder Ungarn abgeschickt wurden: Ich bin gesund, es geht mir gut.<sup>645</sup>

The letter is a final testimony of violence not just in its forced expression of untruth, but also in the way it imposes a fake final memory of the beloved. As a hand written letter, it creates the illusion of intimacy where there is actually only strategic propaganda. It robs the victim of their voice at the most defining moment, shortly before death. The manipulated, interrupted quality of this keepsake reveals more about the perpetrator than the victim. The second relic that is in Ambras’ possession therefore figures as a counter-document, an act of resistance and alternative memory. It is a photograph of his beloved from happier times bearing a personal inscription on the back:

*Nordpol, am Freitag.  
Ich habe eine Stunde im Eis auf dich gewartet.  
Wo warst du, mein Lieber?  
Vergiß mich nicht.  
L.<sup>646</sup>*

The fantasy location (the North Pole) and missed connection indicated in the note create the intimate memory space that the camp letter manages to erase and subordinate. The note functions as a caption to the photograph, and its admonition to remember has turned

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<sup>645</sup> Ransmayr, *Geständnisse eines Touristen. Ein Verhör*, 2004, 121-122.

<sup>646</sup> Ransmayr, *Morbus Kitahara*, 205.

into a self-fulfilling prophecy, since Ambras eventually dies because he is assaulted by the past. He falls while climbing a mountain on a former prison island in Brazil with Bering, following what seems to be a psychotic episode through which he is transported back in time. Already the island's name, Ilha do Cão, meaning dog island, which echoes his mythological name “the dog king,” suggests that this destination is a circular completion of Ambras’ fate. The moment he sets foot on the island, he begins to hallucinate the topography of the Ebensee prison camp (“Wo ist das Tor? Wo der Zaun? Irgendwo hier, zwischen diesen beiden eingesunkenen Baracken, muss doch das Lagertor sein”<sup>647</sup>) and imagines Bering as a camp guard: “Der schreit ihn an. Der hat einen Strick. Will er ihn zurückholen ins Lager?”,<sup>648</sup> As he hallucinates being back in his past, he also imagines a reunion with his lost beloved: “*Ich bin gesund. Es geht mir gut. Schießen sie schon? Der Schuß, den er hört – gilt dieser Schuß ihm? Er fürchtet sich nicht. Denn er sucht seine Liebe und alles, was ihm schon lange fehlt, dort, wo sich so viel Verlorenes fängt. Er geht in den Zaun.*”<sup>649</sup> He deliberately lets himself fall from a cliff (“Er tritt einfach ins Leere”) and escapes his trauma by surrendering his life. His choice evokes the choices made by survivors such as Primo Levi and Jean Améry. This tragic ending is a result of the victim’s inability to escape the past and the terror of being forced to remember against one's own will:

Es ist eben nicht wahr, dass 1945 die Lagertore alle aufgesprungen sind und die Geschichte wenigstens für die Überlebenden gut ausgegangen ist. Es gibt Leute, für die ist die Vergangenheit nicht vergangen, für die gibt es nur diese Unzeit, in der alle Zeiten, ihre Vergangenheit, ihre Zukunft,

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<sup>647</sup> Ibid., 431.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid., 439.

<sup>649</sup> Ibid., 431.

zusammenschießen. Leute, die die dazu verurteilt sind, in dieser Unzeit zu leben und immer wieder dorthin zurückkehren, woraus sie doch einmal befreit wurden.<sup>650</sup>

With its collapse of different time planes through the practice of dystopia, *Morbus Kitahara* illustrates precisely this refusal of the past to be over. The “Unzeit,” or non-time that Ransmayr refers to in the above quote finds its expression in the u-topos, no-place or dys-topia, the place from hell that the citizens of Moor are forced to live in.<sup>651</sup> Utopia, of course, is a fantasy of escape, while dystopia is a vision of entrapment, exactly the kind that Kundera and Konrád had tried to oppose with Central Europe as a counter-space to the eastern bloc. For Austria in the 1990s, the Nazi past is a similar imprisonment, a nightmare that the majority of the population wishes to leave behind instead of acknowledging it, which only increases its power to terrify.

Both “Przemysl” and *Morbus Kitahara* offer uncanny, disturbing perspectives of the specifically Austrian brand of *Mittleuropa*: a European geography of conflict and disillusionment, populated by grizzly ghosts of the past, it bears none of the features of the “golden Habsburg” period that cultural conservatives idealized in the first decades after the Second World War. Rather than just reflecting its own uncomfortable past and failed myths back to the Austrian public, Ransmayr deconstructs the convenient commodity that *Mittleuropa* had become in all its facets: as a guilt-free reference to former glory and diversity, an outlet for the inferiority complex that has haunted Austria ever since its truncation in 1918, and as a shield against recurring political problems.

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<sup>650</sup> Interview with Sigrid Löffler, “Das Thema hat mich bedroht,” Wittstock, *Die Erfindung der Welt*, 215.

<sup>651</sup> While the Ancient Greek prefix “dys” carries the meaning of bad, unfortunate, Vergil’s underworld in the *Aeneid*, another form of negative utopia, with which Ransmayr was certainly familiar, is called Dis.

Ransmayr's writings are shaped by the open antagonisms that have erupted in Austria since the Waldheim affair: the same people who were calling for a "clean slate" with reference to the Nazi regime were also campaigning against Austria's membership in the European union, and the proliferation of new Jewish writings in the 1990s concurred with a surge in popularity of the ultra-nationalist FPÖ, whose leader Jörg Haider expressed both anti-Slav and anti-Semitic sentiments. At a time in which much more dangerous myths than the one constructed around Habsburg were being recuperated, the representation of reality as fantastic and of mythical archetypes as real unsettles the process of myth making in general and thus becomes a postmodern form of resistance. By redefining *Mitteleuropa* in his own terms, and bringing it back to the nightmarish premonition that already appeared in Stefan Zweig and Joseph Roth, Ransmayr performs a more self-reflective continuation of the Anti-Heimatliteratur. A novel like *Morbus Kitahara* is beyond the melancholy or nostalgia evoked by the imminent loss of an (even imperfect) empire, because those feelings become impossible in the face of the more recent barbarisms that Ransmayr wants to expose. This is certainly connected to the fact that unlike Bachmann or Handke, he did not grow up in a familial and geographical environment where the outlines of the former Empire were still discernable.

In this he differs from Dubravka Ugrešić, whose work is defined by the palimpsestic layering of history which she experienced in the former Yugoslavia – the traces left in Croatia by the monarchy that once ruled over it until 1918, the Socialist period between 1945 and 1990, and the freshly homogenized nation state of Croatia which emerged after the Yugoslav wars. Ugrešić's writing is both nostalgic, in that it tries to recall a lost Socialist milieu that was both dynamic and inspiring, but also acerbic

when it zeroes in on the nationalisms that have destroyed it. In her defense of art against politics, and of humanism against fundamentalism, she is both a *Mitteleuropa* writer in the tradition of Zweig, and as well Konrad. What she shares with Ransmayr is the postmodern literary pastiche in which she embeds this carefully constructed attack on the home, as well as the realization that the dystopian experience has become paradigmatic in a globalized Central Europe.

### **Dubravka Ugrešić – Yugoslavia as Central Europe’s Nightmare**

Dubravka Ugrešić’s dialogue with Central Europe begins at a time when the official conditions of its “tragedy” according to Kundera have been erased. In her writings since the early 1990s, she examines not just the demise of Yugoslavia, but the challenges of memory in a post-communist European geography, the revival of nationalism and its aesthetic and political consequences, from kitsch to xenophobia and the impoverishment of artificially homogenized nation-spaces. Ugrešić first gained widespread attention in Europe with a collection of essays entitled *Culture of Lies*, which first appeared in Dutch in 1994 and in German in 1995 before it found a publisher for the Croatian original in 1996. At this point Ugrešić, once a celebrated Yugoslav writer and professor at the Institute for Literary Theory in Zagreb, had been living in exile in Amsterdam for already two years, where she took refuge after a hate campaign had been launched against her and four other Croatian women intellectuals who had spoken out against the fierce nationalism of the Tuđman presidency.<sup>652</sup> Ostracized as a “traitor” and “pro-communist” “witch,” facing threats on a daily basis, she decided to leave, and henceforth became a

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<sup>652</sup>Franjo Tuđman was the first president of the independent republic of Croatia, in office from 1990 until his death in 1999.

chronicler of the Yugoslav past which was quickly being erased by the new authorities in independent Croatia.<sup>653</sup>

Like many writers from the former Yugoslavia, she reaffirms the centrifugal power dynamics between the German center and the Slavic fringes of Central Europe by linking the disintegration of Yugoslavia to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Nowhere does this become clearer than in her novel *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* (1998), which was largely written during a Fulbright residence in Berlin. The text, which is in fact a collection of short prose pieces that reflect on the attempt to remember against a jarringly rearranged European map, alternates between the Berlin present and the Yugoslav past. Ugrešić places personal encounters in Berlin next to anecdotes from Yugoslavia, historical data from museums next to narrated photographs, and literary quotes next to childhood memories of popular culture. Berlin, now united and liberated, a refuge for those who were recently displaced from their homelands, but with its historical layers of time still clearly visible, is a perfect foil for the telling of another, unanticipated European tragedy. Reflecting on her stay there some twenty years later, Ugrešić remarks:

[...] it was Berlin, not Zagreb, that served as a generator for reminiscence, as an ideal cutting desk for the montage of memories, a lens with a perfect zoom and refraction, a pair of glasses custom-made for reading the Yugoslav and East European collapse.<sup>654</sup>

In the Zagreb of the early 1990s, the memory of Socialist Yugoslavia has become a taboo, a threat to the newly acquired Croatian identity. Berlin, on the other hand, is at the central vortex of the “return of memory” at the end of the communist regimes as postulated by

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<sup>653</sup> Andrew Baruch Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant After Communism. The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 151.

<sup>654</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *Europe in Sepia* (Rochester, NY: Open Letter Books, 2014), 9.

Tony Judt. Just as the old divisions of the continent are being mended, it thus becomes the focal lens for a new topography of loss. With its geographical closeness and conflicted relationship to the east, as well as its saturation with historical memory, the city is part of an old Central European network of urban nodes in ways that other western capitals have never been.<sup>655</sup> In her novel *The Ministry of Pain* (2004), in many ways a follow up to themes laid down in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, Ugresić's main character, an émigré from Zagreb, stops over in Berlin before moving to the neutral territory of Holland, which is described as “flat, wet, non-descript,” “a country of forgetting, a country without pain.”<sup>656</sup>

In the Berlin neighborhood where Goran and I had lived I would stop in front of the large window of a refugee ‘club.’ Through the glass I could see ‘our people’ mutely playing cards, staring at the television set and taking occasional swigs of beer straight from the bottle. The hand-drawn map on the wall was festooned with postcards. It had a geography all its own. The places they came from – Brčko or Bijeljina – stood at the center of the world: these were the only homelands the men had left. Surrounded by smoke rings they looked as ‘former’ as their one-time nationality; they looked like corpses that had risen from the grave for a bottle of beer and a round of cards but ended up in the wrong place.<sup>657</sup>

This scene demonstrates not just the workings of memory in exile, which contributes to skewed geographies guided by nostalgic impulse, but also the ways that the lost home acquires both utopian and dystopian qualities. The picture postcards adorning the map suggest pleasant snap shots of the past, while the appearance of the men as undead characters indicates the illusion and irretrievability of that home. What the western reader might not know, and what contributes to the eerie quality of this scene is that that

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<sup>655</sup> Schlögel, *Die Mitte liegt ostwärts*, 43.

<sup>656</sup> Ugresić, *The Ministry of Pain*, 202.

<sup>657</sup> Ugresić, *The Ministry of Pain*, 23.

both towns mentioned in this passage are Bosnian, and they each have their own symbolic meaning in the Yugoslav tragedy. In 1996, after the Dayton agreement had ended the armed conflict in Bosnia and Croatia, Brčko became the site of Camp McGovern, a peacekeeping base built by the U.S.-led Implementation Forces (IFOR) on the outskirts of the city meant to keep tension between Bosnian Muslims and Serbs in check. Highly contested due to its strategically sensitive location close to the Croatian border, the town was turned into a special district outside the jurisdiction of either of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska, the two entities that comprise Bosnia and Herzegovina since the end of the war, thus becoming de facto no-mans land. Bijeljina, on the other hand, is the site of a massacre on Bosnian Muslims by paramilitary Serb forces in April 1992, and as such it became part of the European topography of terror next to Auschwitz.<sup>658</sup>

It was also Berlin, as the capital of reunited Germany, which supported the Croatian and Slovenian secession from Yugoslavia, and whose intellectuals, along with their Austrian, French and English counterparts perceived the new Balkan wars as a repetition of Europe's worst nightmares, nationalism and ethnic hatred.<sup>659</sup> What Ugrešić fails to say in this excerpt, but elaborates in many other examples beyond, is the reciprocal relationship between the Bosnian village and Berlin of the 1990s: not only did Berlin mirror the ruins of Yugoslavia, but the explosive nationalisms and ethnic conflicts

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<sup>658</sup> See Steven L. Burg, *The War in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Ethnic Conflict and International Intervention* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1999).

<sup>659</sup> Jaques LeRider, *Der österreichische Begriff von Zentraleuropa – Mythos oder Realität?* (London: Institute of Germanic & Romance Studies, School of Advanced Study, University of London, 2008.)



of disintegrating Yugoslavia also mirrored the history of violence intimately tied to Berlin and Vienna. Due its role as a particularly brutal site of large-scale, ethnically motivated killing, Bosnia and particularly its capital Sarajevo turned into a monument for European moral failure:

Unpredictable reality brought Europeans at the end of the century an unexpected gift: the repetition of their historical nightmares in the flesh. The live-show, the war in Bosnia, quickens the collective metabolism, cleanses moral and intellectual attitudes, revives forgotten traumas, stimulates re-interpretations. [...] This is why at this moment many Europeans are rushing to Sarajevo to place flowers on their own graves. 'Europe died in Sarajevo', this is the truth that has been transformed into a beautiful and sad slogan. We are sorry that we have died, they say, our condolences, they say, and they return beneficially cleansed to their homes.<sup>660</sup>

This excerpt from *Culture of Lies* is aimed against the manipulation of memory Ugrešić witnessed during the first years of the Yugoslav civil wars, often aided by common media outlets, and fueled by resuscitated nationalisms. It is as much a reflection of personal disillusionment as it is of the fall of Yugoslavia. The fragmented structure of the essays pieces, a literary form that Ugrešić would maintain as her only expression after her emigration, reflects not just the fragmentation of the geographical and cultural space that had once been her home, but eventually comes to represent the fragmentation of Europe in the global age of capitalism. In this sense, Ugrešić's essayistic texts are a continuation of the literary collages she had created in her celebrated postmodern novels *Steffie Cvek in the Jaws of Life* (1983) and *Fording the Stream of Consciousness* (1988), the first being a satire of the academic scene in Eastern Europe, the other a parody on (sexist) women's magazines, both ludist literary experiments in their own right. While the use of irony and intertextuality would remain defining for her texts, however, the new essayistic

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<sup>660</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, trans. Celia Hawkesworth (London: Phoenix House, 1998), 200.

collages that emerge with *Culture of Lies* are no longer testimonies to aesthetic playfulness but serve to demonstrate, in their fragmentation, hybridity and disorder, the “postmodern hell” of war.<sup>661</sup> It has been observed that before the war, along with many other Yugoslav writers that were labeled postmodern in the 1980s, such as Milorad Pavić and Filip David, Ugrešić was drawing on an autonomous, non-referential understanding of literature, not engagement. Particularly Zagreb’s Institute for Literary Theory where Ugrešić was teaching for decades was strongly influenced by Russian formalism and French structuralism.<sup>662</sup> Despite the fact that her satirical novels debunk gender myths and problematize social structures, they were not tailored to a political message, which changed radically in the 1990s. Not only did Ugrešić abandon the novel form in favor of the essay, but the presence and ethical stance of the author became crucial for her literary work. All of her publications from then on contain an only thinly veiled autobiographical narrator: a Croatian woman who has left her former country due to defamation and extreme nationalism, and who rebuilds her erstwhile home in her mind, by gathering anecdotes, news reports, private and collective memories. Ugrešić’s writings therefore underwent an unprecedented political turn through the experience of war and exile, which earned her the categorization as a dissident writer against her will. But even though she rejected the role of ethnographer and spokesperson for her ‘barbaric’ homeland assigned to her in her Western refuge, her new work undoubtedly carried a

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<sup>661</sup> Ibid., 199. Ugrešić uses the analogy “postmodern hell” or “postmodern chaos” repeatedly.

<sup>662</sup> David Williams, *Writing Postcommunism: Towards a Literature of East European Ruins* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 40-41.

signature of engagement that was missing before, and which aligned her with the Central European authors of the 1980s.<sup>663</sup>

Consequently, I will show in which ways Ugrešić's prose miniatures in *Culture of Lies* align themselves with the characteristic Central European essayism that has been exhibited by Danilo Kiš, György Konrád and Czesław Miłosz. Ugrešić pays particular homage to Kiš and Konrád, whom she references and quotes extensively throughout the book, but browsing through her work indicates that she was well acquainted with the authors involved in the 1980s debate on *Mitteleuropa*. Her innovative essay pieces, situated somewhere between *belles lettres* and popular culture, exemplify the skeptical heritage of the Central European writers she references (a heritage, she claims, which Yugoslav writers –with few exceptions– lack, since Tito's tolerant “soft-communism” did not force them into the same fierce opposition.<sup>664</sup> The indebtedness to this heritage is also demonstrated in *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* where one ‘chapter’ juxtaposes quotes from Milan Kundera, Czesław Miłosz, György Konrád, Jorge Luis Borges and Peter Handke to statements made by the protagonist's mother.<sup>665</sup> The personal and the literary, the trivial and the sophisticated do not just intersect for Ugrešić but prove to be indelibly tied to each other. In this she follows György Konrád, who had insisted on the autonomy and subjectivity of art as the only stabilizing factor in a politicized world:

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<sup>663</sup> This shift in Western perception of Yugoslav writers from the 1980s to the 90s can be illustrated by a telling example. In 1988, Ugrešić participated in a literary symposium in Graz with the title “The Yugoslav Labyrinth,” which had the intention to discuss current postmodern authors and denied any political focus. In 1995 and 1999, follow-up events were organized, the “labyrinth” now symbolizing postmodern versatility and hermeticism, but instead the situation of political impasse following the Yugoslav wars. See *Das jugoslawische Labyrinth: Symposien im “Forum Stadtpark” 1988, 1995, 1999*, ed. Christine Rieger (Innsbruck: Studienverlag, 2001).

<sup>664</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 37, 174-175.

<sup>665</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 55-57.

“What then, is still certain, if everything seems so uncertain? Literature is rather certain. The personal is rather certain.”<sup>666</sup>

*Culture of Lies* strives to prove two theses by providing both private, though fictionalized, and official, but not verified information (i.e. footnotes provide the reader with a general context but rarely with a bibliographical source): 1. The bloody Yugoslav conflicts of the 1990s have been exacerbated, if not directly caused by nationalist propaganda in the media. 2. In order to replace the old Yugoslav identity of interethnic “brotherhood and unity” with a feeling of singular ethnic belonging, an effort was made to systematically erase the collective past from the minds of its inhabitants. The achievement of “collective amnesia” required the destruction or replacement of everything pertaining to Socialism, Yugoslavia (the name of the country itself becoming taboo), Tito etc. and the excavation or cultural 'artifacts' which furthered separatist identification. This led to a publicly endorsed culture of lies and the establishment of turncoat mentality. The chapter “Culture of Lies” describes the manipulation of memory in all its facets:

One of the strategies with which the culture of lies is established is terror by forgetting (they force you to forget what you remember!) and terror by remembering (they force you to remember what you do not remember!) [...] Yugoslavia (a country in which Croatian citizens had lived for some fifty years!) became a prohibited word, and the terms *Yugoslav*, *Yugonostalgic* or *Yugo-zombie* are synonymous with national traitor. The old symbols – flags, coats of arms, the names of streets, schools, squares – have been removed and replaced by new ones; the language and its name have been changed (Cyrillic and Serbian have become undesirable). Almost overnight a whole system of values has been changed. So 'anti-fascists', former 'partisans', 'communists', the 'left wing', 'anti-nationalists' (previously positively marked terms) have suddenly become negatively marked [...]. The formerly negatively valued

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<sup>666</sup> György Konrád, *Stimmungsbericht* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1988), 19. My translation from the German edition.

nationalists, terrorist-emigrés, 'Ustashes' and the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) itself have acquired a neutral or even positive connotation. In that sense many historical concepts and 'historical facts' have undergone abrupt reassessment. [...] The NDH today is often seen as a state that was admittedly Nazi, but at the same time realized the age-old longing for Croatian statehood.<sup>667</sup>

A new set of images, a new public vocabulary is established, but the effect of simultaneity mentioned before cannot be completely erased. The shadow of the past looms in the background of this glossed-over, brand new reality like the outlines of a dust-covered ancient mosaic, leading to schizophrenia, a byproduct of the “postmodern chaos” for which the war in Yugoslavia appears to be a perfect example. The fictionalization of reality is a part of this dystopian chaos, being a dangerous byproduct of the culture of lies. While the Western media are accused of relishing in calamity pornography (“The war in Yugoslavia is a life-show: a living retrospective of an already forgotten European repertoire of evil,”<sup>668</sup>) the traumatized Yugoslavs are fictionalizing their lives in a desperate attempt to keep their sanity: “I am a terminator,' said my friend soon after she had left Sarajevo, 'I have seen so much death that I cannot be anything but a terminator,’” or “I am sitting in life like a cinema,' wrote my Belgrade friend a long time ago.”<sup>669</sup>

By using the essay form to attack the distortion of truth, Ugrešić is aligning herself with Theodor W. Adorno’s assessment that the essay’s tentative, meandering, and pluralistic nature protected it from the pitfalls of ideology: “The essay shies away from the violence of dogma, from the notion that the result of abstraction, the temporally

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<sup>667</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 78-79.

<sup>668</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>669</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

invariable concept indifferent to the individual phenomenon grasped by it, deserves ontological dignity.”<sup>670</sup> Even more drastically, the essay challenges traditional notions of reality, which makes it inherently subversive:

The usual reproach against the essay, that it is fragmentary and random, itself assumes the givenness of totality and thereby the identity of subject and object, and it suggests that man is in control of totality. But the desire of the essay is not to seek and filter the eternal out of the transitory; it wants, rather, to make the transitory eternal. Its weakness testifies to the non-identity that it has to express, as well as to that excess of intention over its object, and thereby it points to that utopia which is blocked out by the classification of the world into the eternal and the transitory. In the emphatic essay, thought gets rid of the traditional idea of truth.<sup>671</sup>

The essay's “non-identity,” i.e. its refusal to be tied down to one principle, stems from an “affinity with open intellectual experience<sup>672</sup>” for which it pays with “the lack of security, a lack which the norm of established thought fears like death.” This is also why it refuses a definition of the terms with which it operates, does away with the linear continuity of thought, and remains ultimately an open work, an experiment, a fragment. The world that is implied disjointed and fallen from grace, which has to be always kept in mind on the search for truth: “[The essay] thinks in fragments just as reality is fragmented and gains its unity only by moving through the fissures, rather than by smoothing them over.”<sup>673</sup>

Similarly, Ugrešić's essays in *Culture of Lies* remain in the Central European tradition in that they do not offer a juxtaposed ‘truth‘ but are rather several approaches, or “tentative inquiries,” to follow Montaigne, towards delicate subjects. And like

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670 Theodor Adorno, “The Essay as Form,” trans. Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, *New German Critique*, No. 32. (Spring - Summer, 1984), 158.

671 Ibid., 159.

672 Ibid., 161.

673 Ibid., 164.

Montaigne's *essais* they are first and foremost a form of self-introduction and self-examination. They thus comply with Konrád's and Kiš's claim that the Central European writer speaks only for (and about) him/herself. Ugrešić's self-portrait comes in the form of a patchwork: she interweaves fictional narrative with literary quotes, adds fragments from media reports, folklore songs; affective passages (with exclamation marks) are placed next to meditative paragraphs à la Kiš. Like Montaigne, she displays a general skepticism which excludes no reader together with a modest, at times self-deprecating tone. To Ugrešić, irony and melancholy are the two main components of critical reflection, keeping sentimentalism in check similar to Kiš's poetics of "ironic lyricism." One example for this is the introductory anecdote to the chapter "Priests and Parrots" in *Culture of Lies*, which describes an imaginary encounter between two Yugoslav writers. After the fall of the Wall, the Central Europeans and the Yugoslavs, it seems, have swapped places. The Yugoslavs, once the model of a multiethnic, pluralistic and mobile community as envisioned by Konrád, are now experiencing the position of the marginalized European subject:

- "If only I were at least Czech or Hungarian...if I can't be English or French.[...] My last name is bothering me!"
- "I don't understand.."
- "If only it began with a *K*...That might work."
- "And what is this all about?"
- "Then I could connect to Kundera, Konrád, Klíma..."
- "If at least your name was Krleža or Kiš...That might work somehow", I say.
- "It would make a substantial difference".
- "And if you took on a different last name?"
- "Like which one?"
- "How do I know...Kefka. It starts with a *K*." I cautiously suggest.
- "Hmmm, Kafka...Kefka..." my colleague and fellow countryman mumbles.<sup>674</sup>

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<sup>674</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 34.

Here, Ugrešić is referencing a point made by Kiš in his “Variations on Central European Themes.” Kiš had argued that “the impossibility of revelation“ as symbolized through Kafka's almost nameless character K., could be applied to all Central European writers. This one letter, which has both suggestive and veiling meaning, expressed their “eternal ambivalence,“ of their fate, their fragmented, imprecise and protean identity. The ominous *K.* mentioned in Kiš's essay is used here for a parody on the Yugoslav attitude towards the idea of Central Europe. After 1948, the year of Tito's fall out with Stalin, Yugoslavs had lead a life culturally situated between the Soviet Union and Western Europe, looking down arrogantly on the truly ‘Eastern‘ i.e. oppressed, backward European states. Content in this position of the in-between, the Yugoslav writer has not managed to “flee under the umbrella of Central Europe, its cultural environment or myth, its cultural yearning or dream (as Konrád put it), its cultural label.”<sup>675</sup> As a consequence,

At this moment bullets are whistling over Petar Petrović's<sup>676</sup> head, towns are being destroyed before his eyes, people are being killed. No, that couldn't possibly be me, that's not my country, that can't be my life, I've translated Rilke and Proust, I write hermetic poems...Petar Petrović mutters in consternation. And he tests his own reality in the foreign press. In *Newsweek* he sees a photograph of a woman. In one hand, the woman is holding a plastic bag with an innocent leek poking out of it, and in the other – a rifle. The caption reads: *Yugoslav national costume.*<sup>677</sup>

With the fall of the Iron Curtain and the eruption of violent conflict in his country, the Yugoslav writer, personified in Petar Petrović has lost both whatever he might have appropriated from the ‘eastern‘ European identity and his multiethnic Yugoslav self.

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<sup>675</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>676</sup> Petar Petrović is used as a generic Yugoslav name here, comparable to the English John Smith.

<sup>677</sup> Ibid., 36.



Instead, he is urged by his new separatist governments to join the “*Balkan Express*” of violence in which the foreign observers have already placed him. The multiple references to a mutual European cultural heritage that Petar Petrovic is reaching for are of no use to him anymore. For one, he has alienated himself from that community of arts by his own arrogance and carelessness: “He gaped, he had missed out, and everything had been there: he had Krleža, he had Kiš, and after all, Europe had been and still was his cultural home.”<sup>678</sup> But also, the defense against barbarism through art, as postulated by Kiš in his “Variations,” is revealed as a futile attempt. In the same vein that the spatial attributes ‘Yugoslav’ and ‘Balkan’ have become equated, the stigma of barbarism has now become Petrovic’s new identity. Talking to an English journalist, the questioned Yugoslav writer makes a futile attempt at escaping categorization:

“Well, what are you *technically* ?“

I wriggled, stuttered, how can you ask for my blood type, I’m a writer, nothing else...

“Nonsense. It’s totally obvious. You are actually *Balkanese*,” said the Englishman coolly, thus ending our conversation.

“Yes, I am *Balkanese*“ I sighed resigned.<sup>679</sup>

The inquiry about blood types is a reference to Ödön von Horvath, who had described the arising fascism in 1930s Europe as a “a spectral analysis of blood,” based on its racist and biologist underpinnings, and who is also quoted by Danilo Kiš in “The Stateless One.”<sup>680</sup> Ugrešić thus contextualizes the external gaze of the westerner in its ironic

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<sup>678</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>679</sup> Ugrešić, *Kultura lazi*, my translation, since I do not believe that the English translation by Celia Hawkesworth quite captures the original. 53.

<sup>680</sup> Danilo Kiš, “The Stateless One,” 12.

paradox – trying to impose order and civilization while following a categorization that betrays the history of barbarism of the center, not of the margins of Europe.

Like the writings of Christoph Ransmayr, *Culture of Lies* is a reaction to the distortion of truth and the manipulation of memory that follows the trauma of war. And similar to Ransmayr's critical views of postwar myths of Austria (be in Habsburg nostalgia or the identity of victimhood), her dark portrayal of her former home points to the loss of an ideal, even if *ex negativo*. For Ugrešić this is the loss of the Socialist-Humanist principles (brotherhood and unity, internationalism and equality) she absorbed growing up in Tito's Yugoslavia as much as the disintegration of the geographical and that thrived under them. Rather than delivering set definitions for abstract inquiries, Ugrešić's essay fragments create a new catalog of questions, exposing in dialogic form the media fanned '*culture of lies*.'

Ugrešić's belief in the voice of the individual and her use of autobiographical narrative in an essayistic form stem from a categorical rejection of collectives. In the moment that the individual speaks for someone other than themselves, they lose their moral sovereignty. This is why national or political affiliations are replaced by critical humanism, in which the intellectual, naturally, takes up a defining role, as expressed through György Konrád's concept of "Antipolitics:"

Antipolitics is being surprised. A person finds things unusual, grotesque, and more: meaningless. He realizes that he is a victim, and does not want to be. He does not like his life and death to depend on other people. [...] The legitimation of antipolitics is no more or less than the legitimation of writing. That is not the discourse of a politician, nor a political scientist, nor a technocrat, but the opposite: of a cynical and dilettante utopian. He does not act in the name of any mass or collective. He does not need to have behind him any party, state, nation, class, corporation, academic council. Everything

he does, he does of his own accord, alone, in the milieu which he himself has chosen. He does not need to account to anyone, his is a personal undertaking, self-defense.<sup>681</sup>

This is the dictum preceding *Culture of Lies*, (in the original and the German translation the book carries the subtitle *Antipolitical Essays*) and it is the only quote which is the same in the German, English and Croatian edition, where otherwise, probably due to market considerations, additional citations from either Krleža or Ugrešić herself were included.<sup>682</sup> Konrád's term "antipolitics" of course does not connote being 'apolitical' in any way, since the very act of assuming a stance against the ruling system confirms the status quo. Ugrešić is aware of this dilemma, and she is unable to resolve it. She knows that the position of the dissident can be as comfortable and deluding as that of the opportunist, because a naysayer, especially when he is a refugee, necessarily defines themselves as the "victim" mentioned by Konrád above. Her direct 'moral recommendations' therefore have to remain vague and relative, lest they become ideological themselves: "For those who do not play along, there exists the danger of considering themselves better than others and misusing their critique of society as an ideology for their own private interest."<sup>683</sup> This is the reason why *Culture of Lies* starts with a numbered and partitioned autobiographical narrative, rather than an essay proper,

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<sup>681</sup> As quoted in Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, xi.

<sup>682</sup> In the German edition, for instance, Konrád's quote is followed by an anti-war comment by Krleža, claiming that wars have a fertilizing effect on "human stupidity." In the English edition, Krleža is quoted from a different source, presenting literature as "defense of human dignity," right after an excerpt from an article Ugrešić wrote for a Croatian newspaper in 1988 (!) in which she describes how a strange kind of lethargy is spreading among her friends, probably anticipating the political turmoil of the 1990s.

<sup>683</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia. Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003), 26.

because an antipolitical poetics demands that she strips her own identity down to two identity markers: writer, and thinking individual.

1. I was born in the fifth decade of the twentieth century, four years after the end of the Second World War. I was born in Yugoslavia, in a small industrial town not far from Zagreb, the main city of the Republic of Croatia. Many children were born in those years. The country which had been devastated by war was rapidly building its future.[...]

2.[...] I learned that Yugoslavia was a small, beautiful country in the hilly Balkans. I learned that I must preserve brotherhood and unity like the apple of my eye. This was some kind of slogan, whose true meaning I did not really understand. I was probably confused by the poetic image *apple of my eye*. (3)

[...]

6. I grew up in a multinational, multicultural and monoideological community that had a future. I was not interested in politics. My parents taught me nothing about it. The words 'religion', 'people,' 'nationality,'<sup>684</sup> or even 'communism' and 'the party' meant nothing to me. I only wrote one 'political' sentence (and I stole that from a child): 'I love my country because it's small and I feel sorry for it.'<sup>685</sup>

More than just historically contextualizing her own biography, this *David Copperfield* - like introduction, told both from the perspective of a child and the adult who is remembering the child self, aligns the identity of the narrator with the Yugoslav utopia. As the adult self is mourning not just a loss of the past, but a loss of the future it was once promised, utopia is turned into lived experience. Both the idyllic sentiment and nostalgia behind these paragraphs is enforced by the 'once upon a time'- tone of these paragraphs, reminiscent of fairy tales. Communist ideology and its foundational myths

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<sup>684</sup> In the Croatian original, Ugrešić uses the words “narod” and “nacija,” which are in their usage closer to the German “Volk” and “Nation,” terms that were equally misappropriated by the Croatian fascists of the 1940s and the neo-nationalists of the early 1990s.

<sup>685</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 5.

(“brotherhood and unity,” the belief in progress) are accepted with the same factual tone as the sense of national belonging (“In my first documents, where I had to fill in nationality, I wrote 'Yugoslav'<sup>686</sup>”) removing them from the contentious debates of the 1990s. This changes however, when the Yugoslav conflict enters the picture in paragraph # 9. In an ingenious turn, past and present, child's and adult's reality are merged when the child's utopia is turned into an adult dystopia:

9. Time rolled up into a circle, and exactly fifty years later, in the ninth decade of the twentieth century, a new war began. This time, there were no 'wicked Germans, black fascists,' the local participants divided the roles between themselves. Thousands of people lost their lives, homes, identity, children, thousands of people became émigrés, refugees and homeless in their own country. [...] In the name of the present, a war was waged for the past; in the name of the future, a war against the present. In the name of a new future, the war devoured the future. Warriors, the masters of oblivion, the destroyers of the old state and builders of the new ones, used every possible strategy to impose a collective amnesia [...].<sup>687</sup>

Here Ugrešić transforms the trope of the fairy tale into historical nightmare, with different levels of time existing simultaneously and in conflict with each other. Just as the time dimensions have become confused, judgments of right and wrong have been suspended with what appears to be a sudden, unexpected historical sweep. Indignation overcomes the child-now-writer at the sight of this monumental spectacle, the first hint of moral judgment, which will culminate in the commitment to self-defense: “Everything fused in one moment, everything became blatantly and shamelessly simultaneous. At the

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<sup>686</sup> The original has “Jugoslavenka,” indicating the female sex of the author, thus making national belonging even more personal.

<sup>687</sup> Ugrešić, *Culture of Lies*, 6.

same moment, life and death took on the most varied forms.”<sup>688</sup> Her ontological coordinates violently shaken, the writer experiences the workings of history as personal attack: personal biography, previously just embedded in national history is extinguished in the same moment that it is forced to merge, to define itself through national history. The *I* of the narrative, too traumatized to choose a new affiliation, opts for non-identity in paragraph #14: “Although I now have Croatian citizenship, when someone asks me who I am I repeat my mother’s words: ‘I don’t know who I am anymore...’ Sometimes I say: ‘I am a post-Yugoslav, a Gypsy.’”<sup>689</sup> Ugrešić chooses the term gypsy not as a romantic trope but to evoke the exclusion and confusion that follows “the new European nomads,” the exiled Yugoslavs. Referring to a historically marginalized group, the metaphor of the gypsy illustrates the paradox situation of the post-Yugoslavs perfectly: in both eastern and western Europe, gypsies are discriminated against because they defy national categorizations, but at the same time they are more marked by ethnic labeling (visibly identified as Gypsies) than any other minority in the region. Ugrešić salvages the formerly polyvalent, hybrid Yugoslav identity, which is now a mere relic of the past, by siding with the outsiders of the new European order to which Croatia now seeks to belong. In space of exile, non-identity becomes connected to the non-place (again utopia) of the past, which now reaches the status of myth:

Was it really like that before? And who is speaking? I. Who am I? No one. I come from Atlantis. Atlantis does not exist. Therefore, I do not exist. If I do not exist, how can what I am saying be taken as true? [...] <sup>690</sup>

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<sup>688</sup> Ibid..

<sup>689</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>690</sup> Ibid., 39

While *Culture of Lies* focuses primarily on the enforced processes of forgetting in Croatia after 1991, Ugrešić's later writings attempt a more extensive and prosaic recovery of the Yugoslav cultural experience through the lens of what Svetlana Boym has called "reflective nostalgia." Nostalgia of this kind acknowledges that "the home is in ruins, or, on the contrary, has just been renovated and gentrified beyond recognition," it is a "form of deep mourning that performs a labor of grief."<sup>691</sup> In Ugrešić's case, it appears as a collection of affective memories from Yugoslav everyday life that are repeated and rearranged in different configurations in both *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender* and *The Ministry of Pain*. Both 'novels' explore different transmitters of nostalgia. In *The Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, the narrator recalls her Yugoslav childhood through her mother's family photographs, which are first stored in a brown pig-skin bag along with other memorabilia (love letters from her father, a gold coin, a silver cigarette case, a lock of the protagonist when she was a child) before they are transferred to regular albums.<sup>692</sup> In *The Ministry of Pain*, the Croatian exile Tanja Lucic, now teaching Serbo-Croatian at the university of Amsterdam, invites her students, a group of Yugoslav refugees, to pack their memories of Yugoslav popular culture into an imaginary plastic bag of red, white and blue color ("like a parody of the Yugoslav flag...minus the red star") that could be bought at flea markets all over Eastern Europe.<sup>693</sup> Both of these bags are described as disorderly, worn-down, and strangely possessed by an agency of their own: images and memories spill out of them, attack the nostalgic at unexpected moments and refuse to comply with idealizing projections. For the Yugoslav

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<sup>691</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 50, 55.

<sup>692</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 15-17.

<sup>693</sup> Ugrešić, *Ministry of Pain*, 53 -54.

refugees, an imaginary reconstruction of their former home in such a manner offers an alternative to the disorientation of space they face in exile:

The manner in which they moved and the places where they came together betrayed their loss of personal space: the bench in front of the house, where they could watch the world pass by, or on the waterfront, where they could see what ships came in and who came down the gangplank;[...] In the cities of Europe they vainly sought the coordinates of space they had left behind them.<sup>694</sup>

The memories of everyday life that are recollected in the imaginary “Gypsy bag for our ‘Yugonostalgic museum’” are meant to further a sense of a community, produce a virtual cartography of the past that overcomes the trauma of war. This ‘museum’ includes popular foods, such as burek and baklava, public holidays or staged events such as the annual rally for Tito’s birthday on TV, but also more personal memories like a favorite comic strip, tea dances at school, or traveling with the country’s railroad system, which was based on Austro-Hungarian tracks and stations. However, Tanja Lučić is quickly confronted with the caveats of such an exercise:

I realized that I was walking a tightrope: stimulating the memory was as much a manipulation of the past as banning it. The authorities in our countries had pressed the delete button, I the restore button [...] And even though they were manipulating millions of people and I only these few, we were both obfuscating reality.<sup>695</sup>

It is not just the fact that the country they are evoking does not exist anymore that makes this endeavor morally problematic. Even more precariously, the invoked utopia is bound to be pervaded by the very element that shattered it. When asked to “salvage what you don’t want to forget,” the Bosnian student Selim names the concentration camp in Omarska, in which the Bosnian Serbs had interned, tortured and killed the local Muslim

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<sup>694</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>695</sup> Ibid., 58.



population in 1992: “It’s the only virtual exhibit I’ve got. The Serbs slit my dad’s throat there.”<sup>696</sup> The Yugoslav wars have created new spaces of traumatic memory, which are now intertwined with the old Socialist popular myths. Lučić is right in calling the collecting of memories “spiritualism” or “archeology” – what is unearthed in seemingly innocent story-telling is not just the quotidian but the ghosts and deeper, terrifying layers of the Yugoslav past. For this reason, the refugees are both attracted and repulsed by a collective Yugoslav identity – while it offers a fleeting feeling of solidarity, it also creates a sense of responsibility and entanglement, in spite of the fact that they all consider themselves victims of the recent political turmoil: “Over and over I heard people say, It’s not my war!’ And it wasn’t our war. Because if it hadn’t been our war too, we wouldn’t have been here now. Because if it had been our war, we wouldn’t have been here either.”<sup>697</sup> Paradox and chaos define the reality in exile, in which the past is constantly overshadowing the present, just as the lost home, overloaded with history, weighs down the generic, obliterating Dutch plain, which figures as “one big blotter: it sucks up everything: memories, pain, all that crap...”<sup>698</sup> The upheaval of time and space as stable reference points is also demonstrated by the strange distortion of memory which indeed takes place in the group, just as the lecturer had feared. For instance, a Croatian student, Igor, repeatedly reminisces about events that he never experienced in person, but which he must have absorbed in an affiliative act of post-memory due to his identification with the Socialist Yugoslav collective. When the lecturer points out the discrepancy between his lived experience and his much more encompassing repository of

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<sup>696</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>697</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>698</sup> Ibid., 203.

memory, he replies: “But I got Yugogenes, Comrade, and they remember.”<sup>699</sup> As elements that depersonalize their carriers as much they physically ‘imprint’ them, the “Yugogenes” are an allegory for how affiliation with a larger group can transcend and replace actual family ties, even across time and space. What is problematic about them is the fact that they lead their carriers astray, for they make them believe that the environment that produced them still exists; and as such they are at odds with reality.

This affective, intensely physical impact of the memory experiment is the main reason for its eventual failure, and the disintegration of the student group mirrors the disintegration of the country. While a few students decide to drop out of university, one commits suicide, another returns to Serbia, where she is killed in the NATO bombings, and still another one assaults the lecturer both mentally and physically for being a politically correct hypocrite. Before saying her goodbyes, a Bosnian student, Meliha, describes the recurring cycle of fragmentation and reassembling that defines the post-Yugoslav condition:

I’ll be walking along and suddenly I will have to stop and pick up the pieces, the pieces of myself. My arms, my legs, and phew! There’s my crazy head. [...] I glue them together and they hold for a while. I think that it’s for good, and then I’m in pieces again. And again I pick them up and put myself together like a jigsaw puzzle until the next time...<sup>700</sup>

The perceived dismemberment of the body, just like the persistent nagging of the Yugogenes, reflects the incessant conflict the students experience between individual and collective identity, which also surfaces in the estrangement of their common language. Soon after Yugoslavia began to fall apart territorially, the official idiom of Socialist

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<sup>699</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>700</sup> Ibid., 175.

Yugoslavia, Serbo-Croatian, was rejected by the new nation states in favor of their own specific version (Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian) which they proceeded to purge of any ‘foreign’ elements – an eerie linguistic continuation of the ethnic cleansing. This double displacement from geographic home and mother tongue turns the Yugoslav exiles into “linguistic invalids.” Upon arriving in Holland, Lučić observes that they “communicate in a kind of half-language, half swallowing their words and uttering semi-sounds,”<sup>701</sup> which also explains why her students are more comfortable expressing themselves in Dutch or English, languages that are not viewed as projection screens for ideologies of separation. Not surprisingly, however, the mimicry that they are able to perform through these languages is only partial and temporary. By having the students expose their “Balkanization” time and again, a term that regained popularity in the early 1990s to denote the negatively perceived parcellation of larger national units into small, weak entities,<sup>702</sup> Ugrešić both criticizes and confirms the Western stereotypes towards the post-Yugoslavs. Instead of scrambling for wholeness by acquiring a fake new Western identity, she suggests embracing self-orientalization as an act of defiance. Done consciously (not as a reaction triggered by shame, as Todorova describes it in her famous book<sup>703</sup>), it reclaims identity as fragmented without trying to repair it. This is why *The Ministry of Pain* ends with the description of a ritualistic invocation of the shattered self that Tanja Lučić performs regularly on the empty Dutch beaches:

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<sup>701</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>702</sup> See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, 1997, 32-37. Todorova clarifies that the original process of “Balkanization” was national remakings following the Balkan wars from 1912-1913, during which the Ottoman Empire lost all of its European territory.

<sup>703</sup> Ibid., 50-54.

I flicker my tongue like a fairy-tale dragon, and it forks into Croatian, Serbian, Bosnian, Slovenian, Macedonian...Facing the invisible wall, I thrust my head rhythmically into the wind and speak. Enveloped in the wind, imprinted onto the landscape as into a lantern-slide panorama, I the Teacher, the pride of my generation, speak what I have to speak, my Balkan litany. I secrete the words from my mouth like ink from a cuttlefish. I post my sounds to the nameless like a message in the bottle.<sup>704</sup>

Again, the empty canvas of the Dutch landscape is used for the projection of the “lantern-slide panorama,” “Balkan litany” bursting with Babylonian languages and mythical imagery, ripe with turmoil and suffering. But as another passages clarifies, “the nameless” that Lučić addresses are not just the post-Yugoslavs, for the divisions that have destroyed the Yugoslav collective are part of a larger Central European history of destruction in the 20<sup>th</sup> century at the hand of totalitarian ideologies. After the failure of her memory experiment in class, Lučić watches Phillip Kaufmann’s adaptation of Kundera’s Central European classic *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* from 1988, which makes her realize that the only community left for the citizens of “other Europe” in the globalized age is the community of the defeated, confirming thus Kundera’s claim of the Central Europe’s minor nations as “the victims of history:”

Even though I felt that the only story I had a proper copyright on was the ‘Yugoslav story,’ at that moment all stories were mine. I wept in my innermost being over the imaginary tangled web that bore the arbitrary label of Eastern, Central, East-Central, Southeastern, the other Europe. I couldn’t keep them straight: the millions of Russians that had disappeared in Stalin’s camps, the millions who had perished in the Second World War, but also the ones who had occupied the Czechs and the Czechs who were occupied by the Russians and the Hungarians – they too occupied – and the Bulgarians who fed the Russians and the Poles and the Romanians, and the former Yugoslavs, who basically occupied themselves. I was beating my head against the wall of human loss.<sup>705</sup>

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<sup>704</sup> Ugrešić, *Museum of Unconditional Surrender*, 250.

<sup>705</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

Yugoslavia is caught in the “tangled web” of occupation, slaughter and displacement, in which the chronology of events and their ideological causes become all jumbled up and echo the “postmodern chaos” Ugrešić had identified earlier for the Yugoslav wars in *Culture of Lies*. With the fall of the Berlin Wall and the era of post-communism, the political differences between the Eastern European nations (Soviet bloc vs. non-aligned Yugoslavia) have been erased, and a region which had only restricted access to its past during the Cold War is now being inundated with pastness. The failure of integrating this past, and of coming to terms with the different layers of trauma that have surfaced with it is not remedied by the supposed integration (economic, political, cultural) of those nations into the suprastructure of the European Union. This is particularly visible in the formerly heterogeneous cultural space of the former Yugoslavia. As Ugrešić demonstrates throughout her writing, the price of implementing a capitalist and nationalistic mindset on a community that was built on diversity and solidarity is the callousness that comes with individual estrangement; in this, the new political system appears as equally disruptive as the experience of civil war. The only way for the Central European subject to counter this development is through the conscious practice of nostalgia, which is a partial re-appropriation of (albeit broken) space. Ugrešić illustrates this through the metaphor of an internal camera of nostalgia, a trope reminiscent of Kiš’s “gilded patina,” but transported clearly into the technological age:

Lately I’ve caught myself turning the faces and hues of Central Europe into photographs, an automatic click on an internal camera and I’m done. A second later an iPhoto program whirrs inside me: import – effects – sepia – done. It’s as if the surrounding reality is a screen, stuck to my hand an invisible remote with three options: past, present, future. But only one of them works: past, sepia.<sup>706</sup>

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<sup>706</sup> Ugrešić, *Europe in Sepia*, 19.

By turning the individual glance into a photographic act that produces a seemingly antique documentation of the past, Ugrešić emphasizes not just the tendency of its inhabitants to embellish their past, but also the region's resistance to moving on. The "screen" for this utopianism that is both comforting and melancholy is not merely tied to the observer's personal nostalgia, but is rather created by memory triggers in the space itself. Ugrešić makes these observations on a trip to Bratislava more than two decades after the massive shift in the political landscape of Eastern Europe has taken place, where she still detects traces of Kundera's and Konrad's "kidnapped" Central Europe: The small, shabby hotel with a room that is facing the lobby, instead of the outside world, the Bridge of the Slovak National Uprising, "a communist architectural hangover resembling a giant two-legged robot", leading into "the sleepy heart of the old town, where an affectively Lilliputian statue of Maria Theresa on horseback greets the visitor."<sup>707</sup> Linking the two periods most defining for the identity of Central Europe, the Habsburg and Soviet rule, through the topography of Bratislava, she also allots them a common Central European atmosphere of bleakness, scarcity, and decay is an atmosphere that has been widely described in the literature of the region.<sup>708</sup> As spatialized, solidified formations of time, those different periods share the same power dynamics, which had delegated the region to the geographical and cultural margins of their empire-like states.

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<sup>707</sup> Ibid., 21-22.

<sup>708</sup> Ugrešić's observations are congruent with Krleža and Musil in their Habsburg criticism, but also Kundera in his literary representations of Prague during Soviet rule, and Tišma description of Central Europe, including Yugoslavia, as a space of apathy and destruction.

## Conclusion

What unites Ugrešić and Ransmayr is their representation of Central Europe, be that Austria or the former Yugoslavia, through the lens of dystopia, as a consequence of historical processes of violence and injustice. The most intriguing aspect in the comparative reading of their work is the similarity with which they both invoke landscapes intrinsically linked to Eastern Europe during the Cold War, but also continuously tie them back to the ravaging histories of the two World Wars, particularly fascism in Austria and Croatia. They create lacerated, disjointed and gloomy geographies of Europe where all order is suspended, where past, present and future meet in a maddening merry-go-round, and where ancient and popular myths are both referenced and debunked as guiding principles. Despite the fact that Ransmayr's apocalyptic world of *Morbus Kitahara* is radically different from Ugrešić's postmodern chaos in *Culture of Lies* or the nostalgic twilight zone of her émigré novels, their distinct visions of a Central Europe after 1989 are both testimonies against forgetting, attempting retrievals of a memory that has been marginalized. They point to the fact that a reintegration of those different strands of cultural memory is necessary for a Europe, which, since the reunification of Germany and the end of Soviet rule in the east has repeatedly declared its will to unity, and yet remains divided along old frontlines. Through the tropes of critical nostalgia and dystopia, they do not offer just a corrective mirror to their respective nation states, but are challenging the self-conception of Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. As Svetlana Boym suggests,

The West Europeans can find plenty of "East European" experiences in their own recent past that might help them realize that the similarities between East and West could be more uncanny than the differences. Perhaps it is this twilight reflection on history that refuses to end in spite of all the new technological

gadgets and e-worlds that will be the East's ultimate contribution to the idea of Europe.<sup>709</sup>

Ugrešić and Ransmayr also share a new, more cautious conceptualization of engaged writing and humanism in the globalized, postmodern age, where art and literature have become commodified to previously unseen degrees, and where the dignity of the individual is threatened by new environmental and political disasters. While they both reject the notion of the poet as prophet and moral authority of his/her nation,<sup>710</sup> they still champion the role of literature as catalyst for intellectual emancipation and transnational solidarity, even against all odds. On March 25<sup>th</sup> 2010, Dubravka Ugrešić gave a lecture at the Viennese Akademietheater on “The Spirit of the Kakanien Province,” in which she examined the destructive relationship between the provinces of the former monarchy and their urban centers in 19<sup>th</sup> century Croatian literature. There is no k.u.k. romanticism in those novels: All the provincial heroes who venture out to study in Vienna, Budapest or Prague lose either their sanity or life upon their return, crushed by the small-mindedness and corruption of their former community. In a publication of the text three years later, Ugrešić added a significant passage that linked “the Kakania project” to Konrad’s and Kundera’s “cultural construct of ‘Central Europe,’” which was only remembered as a “half-hearted call for a new republic of writers.”<sup>711</sup> Ugrešić then invites the reader to

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<sup>709</sup> Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 247.

<sup>710</sup> Ransmayr ridicules the nation of the author as “Figur des Gewissens und Gedächtnisses seiner ganzen Nation.“ See “Hiergeblieben,” in *Die Verbeugung des Riesen, Vom Erzählen*, 2003, 87. Ugrešić highlights the irony that upon leaving Croatia she “became a representative of a place which no longer wanted me. I, too, no longer wanted the place that no longer wanted me [...]. Even today, I still, however, haven’t shaken free of the labels.” Ugrešić, *Nobody’s Home*, trans. Ellen Elias-Bursač (Rochester, NY: Open Letter, 2008), 143.

<sup>711</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, “The Spirit of the Kakanien Province,” in *After Yugoslavia. The Cultural Spaces of a Vanished Land*, ed. Radmila Gorup (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 303.



imagine Central Europe not as a utopia, but a dystopia, “a space of restriction, of decontamination, of deprivation.” She inverts Stefan Zweig’s notion of a borderless Europe of the arts when she prophesies that a “Republic of Literature of Kakania,” where nationality, language or cultural heritage have to be left at the door, would be a failure, as she demonstrates in a fictional dialogue between two “Kakanians:”

“[...] Btw, where are you from?”

“From Kakania, isn’t that obvious?”

“Why would it be?! I bet you are Lithuanian, come on, admit it.”

“No, I am Kakanian. “

“Perhaps you are Jewish, and this is why you insist on being Kakanian?”

“I am Kakanian.”

“Okay, Kakanian, I don’t mind. I am Czech, my mother is Hungarian, I am not ashamed to admit that. From a cultural and historical point of view I am more justified in calling myself Kakanian than you are. But we won’t be splitting hairs here.”[...]”<sup>712</sup>

One of the Kakanians is quite clearly not adhering to the rules. Not only are they reiterating the old Habsburg cliché that only the rootless Jews would need to claim a transnational identity like “Kakania” or *Mitteleuropa*, but their insistence of national, cultural and linguistic categorization corresponds to the imposing practices of the European Union. When further quizzed about their political affiliation, the good Kakanian blithely states that they believe “in the muses” and “in humanism,” which are merely empty phrases in the new Europe. Because Europeans are “too used not treating Others, no matter who those others are, as their own”, “Kakania,” Ugrešić concludes, would be doomed to fail. Ugrešić’s dystopian vision of “Kakania” corresponds to

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<sup>712</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, “Der Geist der Kakanischen Provinz,” my translation from the German transcription of the speech, available at <http://www.erstestiftung.org/kakanien/kakanien/speech-5-dubravka-Ugrešić/>. The reference to Jewish Kakanians was removed from the English version, probably because of its Anti-Semitic undertones might be hard to understand for an Anglophone readership that is unfamiliar with the history of Habsburg Jewry.

Ransmayr's "Free Republic of Przemyśl" in that its imagined failure and destruction simultaneously point to the persistence and necessity of a utopian manner of thinking that includes the other in all their diversity, hybridity and fragmentation. This persistence can be expressed in its opposite as well, as Ransmayr declares: "Denn wer sich die von autoritärer Barbarei verursachten inneren und äußeren Verwüstungen einmal versucht hat, bloß *vorzustellen!*, etwas als Leser oder Zuschauer der Tragödie einer *Mutter Courage* und ihrer Kinder, der wird vielleicht eine Spur weniger anfällig sein gegen die Versuchung, irgendeinem Gegröle, ob in Bierzelten, Kristallnächten oder Parteilokalen, zu applaudieren."<sup>713</sup>

The publicly ordained collective amnesia that Ugrešić describes in the territories of the former Yugoslavia is more aggressive than the more subtle processes of denial in postwar Austria, but it is rooted in the same kind of Arendtian "tribalisms" that Ransmayr attacks in his writing. Both authors challenge the postmodern reader, who is commonly oversaturated with narratives and images of violence with tropes of the hyperbolic and the grotesque, of sarcasm and oversimplification. Even though their Central European sites of memory do not overlap, since Ransmayr is more focused on the interaction between Habsburg and Nazi memory, while Ugrešić foregrounds the connection between the nationalism of the 1990s and Croatia's allegiance with Nazism during the Second World War, there is an eerie resonance between Mauthausen and Omarska, Vienna 1938 and Zagreb 1941. In this sense the old Habsburg connection retains a phantom presence – as the debates of the 1990s have shown, Vienna still thinks of the Balkans as its former backyard with a potential to destabilize the center. This is

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<sup>713</sup> Christoph Ransmayr, "Weinte sonst niemand? Zur Verleihung des Brechtpreises," in *Gerede. Elf Ansprachen* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2014) 16.

particularly demonstrated by the way in which Austrian statements of allegiance towards its former Balkan provinces (“we are all Kakanians, after all”) were usually followed by attempts at distancing (“some Kakanians are less equal than others”), as Ugrešić’s fictional dialogue so wittily demonstrates. But even with the contours of old orientalisms still in place, Ransmayr’s and Ugrešić’s writings show that the vision of *Mitteleuropa* that is mostly defined by its margins and shadows has, for the most part, eclipsed nostalgic evocations of the past. What has remained and even grown after the cataclysmic changes at the end of the century is the need for community and dialogue that Konrad had repeatedly evoked in his promotion of *Mitteleuropa*. Literary collaborations across the former Habsburg space that transcend linguistic and ideological barriers testify to this new development. Next to the lecture series on Kakanien to which Ugrešić, along with numerous other authors from Poland, Serbia, the Ukraine, Hungary and other Central European countries was invited, the curious project “Literature in Flux” was organized in 2010 and 2011, during which a ship carrying a multinational group of authors traveled down the Danube from Vienna, to the Balkans and back.<sup>714</sup> The project, in which Ransmayr participated as well, was sponsored by the European Union and went beyond classical conceptions of Central Europe in that it included both Russian and Turkish authors, and so expanded into the imperial territories which had previously served as its demarcations. Despite the fact that later endeavor sounds like a satirical episode from

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<sup>714</sup> See “Literatur im Fluss. Via Donau:” Im Theater Odeon wird mitteleuropäische Literatur präsentiert” in *Der Standard*, Oct 27, 2011: “Drei Wochen lang war der Raddampfer MS Stadt Wien ein schwimmendes Donau-Literaturhaus. Von Belgrad über Novi Sad, Vukovar, Budapest, Bratislava bis nach Wien führte der Weg des 1939 in Klosterneuburg gebauten ehemaligen Lazarettschiffs.” <http://derstandard.at/1319181401180/Ab-Freitag-Vor-dem-Schiff-auf-dem-Schiff-in-der-Bar-des-Schiffs>. See also the website Literatur im Fluss/ Literature in Flux, <http://literature-in-flux.blogspot.com/2010/09/literature-in-flux-idea.html>. Accessed on March 12, 2015.

one of Ugrešić's novels, collaborations like these prove that the heterotopia of Mitteleuropa is alive and well, and that it does not get tired of redefining itself.

## Concluding Remarks

Etienne Balibar has argued that when talking about Europe today, one faces “the dissolution of the object itself. Europe, in a sense, is a phantom of the past, a name that ‘is history’ rather than society, politics, economics [...]”<sup>715</sup> The same has been observed about *Mitteleuropa*, and yet its manifestations in the literary imaginary still abound. I believe that *Mitteleuropa* as it was envisioned by the authors that I examine in this dissertation is still relevant since the challenges that first inspired its transnational, multiethnic, and plurilingual vision at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century still persist, or, as many have argued, are undergoing a new revitalization almost a hundred years later. As I have already pointed out in my last chapter on Ransmayr and Ugrešić, the end of the Cold War has prompted a plethora of memory revivals, be it in the form of revisionist projects and the nationalisms on which they are based, or through the opening of old archives that revealed new facts about fascist and socialist crimes. This has caused a remapping of the Central European topography of terror, which is still not completed. A recently published study of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum expanded the number of ghettos, death and labor camps during the Nazi period to a shocking extent.<sup>716</sup>

*Mitteleuropa* as both utopian vision and critical mindset is also still relevant since it has become clear that the European Union, due to its expansionist and neo-liberal economic agenda, does not make a notion of *Mitteleuropa* superfluous. The promise of a

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<sup>715</sup> Etienne Balibar, “Europe as borderland,” *Environment and Planning*. D: Society and Space 2009, volume 27, 197.

<sup>716</sup> See Eric Lichtblau, “The Holocaust Just Got More Shocking,” Published on March 1, 2013 in *The New York Times*, accessed at [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/sunday-review/the-holocaust-just-got-more-shocking.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/03/sunday-review/the-holocaust-just-got-more-shocking.html?_r=0). The study cites a total of 42,500 Nazi ghettos and camps throughout Europe.

borderless Europe, of a free-floating exchange of culture has not been fulfilled – instead, as Balibar has pointed out succinctly, the new Europe, by means of its rigid security and immigration policies, has paradoxically become defined by borderlands.<sup>717</sup> Against a mindset of fearful territoriality, Balibar proposes a new vision of a deterritorialized European citizenship, based on “*the European alternative, a European space* which would become a land of differences,” i.e. a space where pluralism and diversity are actively embraced.<sup>718</sup> The conflicting “patterns” which he describes within the formation of the European Union (he terms it “European construction”) have all been highlighted in the discourse of *Mitteleuropa*: a projected “clash of civilizations,” albeit not on the basis of religious, but political camps, the “global network pattern,” the “center-periphery pattern” and the “crossover pattern.” Out of these, the dynamics of the center-periphery relationship, as well as those of global networks seem to have gained importance towards the end of 20<sup>th</sup> century in particular. I hope I have sufficiently demonstrated that Balibar’s observation of how those networks impact real and imagined topographies can be detected in all of the writings that have been examined in the scope of this project:

[There is the] idea of a *primacy of circulation processes* [...] over all processes that are fixed and local [...]. Such a notion does not necessarily deprive boundaries of every meaning, but it relativizes their function, detaches them from the idea of sovereignty. [...] It makes them, as it were, a ‘transitional object,’ and an object of permanent transgression.<sup>719</sup>

Karl Schlögel, on the other hand, who was among the first critics to propose the

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<sup>717</sup> Balibar, “Europe as borderland,” 196.

<sup>718</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>719</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.

rediscovery of the European east for a better understanding of the German (and Austrian) past, has endorsed the existence of borders as a necessary prerequisite for practices of “crossing-over.” “Noch nie ist ein Lob der Grenze gesungen worden, obwohl klar ist, dass es eine Kultur ohne Respektierung von Grenzen und ohne eine Kultur der Übergangs nicht geben kann.”<sup>720</sup> The difference is that Schlögel, quite contrary to Balibar, believes in the benefits, if not legitimacy of empire-related territoriality, since they create clusters of multi-cultural exchange that are often stifled in the confines of the modern nation state. This is why he distinguishes, somewhat problematically, between old and tried border crossings and those that are randomly and artificially imposed: “Wir haben verstanden, dass es einen Unterschied zwischen wohleingerichteten, seit Jahrhunderten existierenden Grenzübergängen gibt und solchen an ganz jungen und künstlichen Grenzen.”<sup>721</sup>

In 2013, both Schlögel and Balibar still cite the missed Western intervention during the ethnic cleansing in Srebrenica as a paradigmatic example of collective moral European failure, which becomes even more tragic considering that the issues at the heart of the Yugoslav conflict (nationalism fueled by economic imbalance and religious/ethnic separatism) are the same that have overshadowed the “European construction” for more than twenty years. If the *Mitteleuropa* discourse in literature during the postwar period, paradoxically, has been a way to both debunk and eerily confirm the Nietzschean dictum of “eternal recurrence,” then it surely has been handed more, not less discursive fodder since the fall of the Berlin Wall. The recent Russian annexation of the Crimea, and the

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<sup>720</sup> Schlögel, *Grenzland Europa*, 59.

<sup>721</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

Ukrainian crisis that preceded it are just a few, perhaps the most stupefying examples for the repetition of *Mitteleuropa* motifs: the rhetoric of East (Russia) against the West (Ukraine) that we already encounter in Kundera's seminal essay, the recuperation of political factions from the Second World War (with the Russian claim to be countering a neo-fascist threat from the Ukraine, who like Croatia, was a Nazi puppet state between 1941 and 1945), the Ukrainian reference to a European heritage, which was betrayed by the Western (particularly German) non-intervention.<sup>722</sup> Through an increased literary presence of *Mitteleuropa* in Ukrainian, Polish but also Croatian and Serbian literature over the last decade or so, the Central European margin is expanding further into its east and south.

Already in 2000, ten years after the end of the Soviet reign, the Ukrainian writer Jurij Andruchovytch had published, together with the Polish author Andrzej Stasiuk, a collection of essays entitled, "My Europe," in which he still affirmed *Mitteleuropa* as a space of ruins, where being surrounded by remnants of an unprocessed past determines the experience of everyday life: ruins of roads, cemeteries, bridges, and even displaced languages.<sup>723</sup> As for the Yugoslav authors, the remnants of German culture in general, not just those of the Nazi period, emerge as a defining element in this experience of ruins. Tracing his family's roots from German-speaking Bohemia and Galicia to present-day Ukraine, Andruchovytch confirms Kundera's positioning of Central Europe between

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<sup>722</sup> See Interview of Jurij Andruchovytch and Katja Petrowskaja, "Die Ukraine wird zum Gewissen Europas." on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2014, on *Deutschlandfunk*. Accessed on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, at [http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/ukraine-im-gespraech-die-ukraine-wird-zum-gewissen-europas.1184.de.html?dram:article\\_id=294498](http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/ukraine-im-gespraech-die-ukraine-wird-zum-gewissen-europas.1184.de.html?dram:article_id=294498).

<sup>723</sup> Jurij Andruchovytch and Andrzej Stasiuk, *Mein Europa.*, transl. by Sofia Onufriv and Martin Pollack (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2013), 1-15.



Russians and Germans.<sup>724</sup> The study of ruins necessarily involves the confrontation with the ghosts of history, which is something that the ideology of the European Union is not prepared to do. He sardonically recalls a *Mitteleuropa* conference with western and eastern participants that might as well have appeared in the writings of Dubravka Ugrešić or Peter Handke, in that it illustrates the prevailing hypocrisies and blind spots of the post-1989 European dialogue:

Es ging um die Erhellung zahlreicher anscheinend sehr wichtiger Sachverhalte: um den „Fall der Mauer und eine Kultur ohne Grenzen“, „Annäherung und Gegensatz der Mentalitäten“, „Alte Nationalismen im neuen Gewand“, „Die geistige Architektur Europas im dritten Jahrtausend“, „postkarnevalistische Sinnlosigkeit der Welt.“ Es gab keine besonders heftigen Diskussionen, da Ost-West-konferenzen dieser Art in irgendeinem komfortablen und mit Kneipen gesegnetem mitteleuropäischen Kaff normalerweise nie zu harten Konfrontationen führen; kein Gespenst der heutigen Anti-Welt störte durch seine Anwesenheit: weder kam Le Pen hoch zu Roß hereingeritten, um eine Rede zu halten, noch Schirinowski mit nackten Weibern und einem Happening à la Kalaschnikoff, kein Saddam Karadžić-Milošević trug patriotische Gedichte vor [...].<sup>725</sup>

The hopeful projections of a new Europe (“a culture without borders,” or the “bringing together of differing mentalities”) have not been fully realized, as long as “the ghosts of today’s anti-world” i.e. new nationalisms and imperialisms are discussed merely on the theoretical plane, and a true confrontation with both Europe’s past and present monsters is avoided. Serbian reflections on *Mitteleuropa* after the end of the Milošević era, during which the discourse had been viewed as having fuelled Croatian and Slovenian separatism seem to point in the same direction. Vladimir Zorić observes that after the Maastricht treaty of 1993, both in the post-Yugoslav territory as well as eastern Europe

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<sup>724</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>725</sup> Ibid., 25.

more generally, Central Europe shifted from a dissident discourse to an “institutional affair” of the European Union.<sup>726</sup> As a fundamentally western driven apparatus, it now began to promote the formerly controversial literatures and arts of Eastern Europe through cultural funds, thus appropriating them as a projection screen for its own vision of European collectivity, which was more driven by Brussels than Vienna or Belgrade. It is due to the considerations of writers like Kiš, that the concept of *Mittleuropa* has become expanded beyond the delineations of the former Habsburg Empire.

From a term that was, both in the former Yugoslavia and beyond, initially treated as synonymous with old Austria, *Mittleuropa* after 1945 came to denote instead a view of the European past which considers the cracks and breeches, the overlappings and hybridities, and ties the totality of its complex cultural legacy to a common civil ethics and European citizenship. The writers that follow in the footsteps of Danilo Kiš, but also Aleksandar Tišma in Serbia today embrace the same type of cautious, reflective but also utopian “European thinking” that Ingeborg Bachmann deemed necessary for the postmodern period, in spite or rather precisely because of the tensions that come with any notion of European collectivity after the two World Wars. Amongst them are Dragan Velikić, who in his 2014 novel *Bonavia* traces the pathways of his own family through Central European history from the Istrian coast to Vienna and Belgrade, or László Végel, a Hungarian-Serbian writer from the Vojvodina, who describes how the urban reconstruction of Novi Sad during Yugoslav socialism erased the officially propagated plurality of cultures, as well as the different layers of the past which were so defining for

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<sup>726</sup> Zorić, “Discordia Concors,” 3.

the region.<sup>727</sup> Different takes on the family epos, often beginning in the Habsburg period, seem to be the new mode of exploring *Mittleuropa* in the literatures of the former Yugoslavia. The Serbian-Jewish author David Albahari, living in Canadian exile since 1994, relates the history of the Holocaust in Croatia and Serbia through tapes on which he has recorded his mother's testimony about her life in his 1996 novel *Mamac* (translated into English as *Bait* in 2001), and the Croatian author Miljenko Jergović reveals his family's entanglement with fascism in his novel *Otac* [Father] (2013, not yet translated into English) which is a fictionalized biography of his father. Jergović's writings, whose family on his father's side were ethnic Germans (Volksdeutsche), unearth not just the uncomfortable history of fascism and the Holocaust during the Independent State of Croatia, but they foreground the complex multiethnic alloy of the former Yugoslavia as a legacy of the Habsburg Empire, the remnants of which are still ubiquitous today. Next to Jergović, Daša Drndić portrays *Mittleuropa* as a site of destruction in her 2007 novel *Sonnenschein* [the Croatian original bears the German title] whose subject follows the fate of a Jewish family in the essentially Central European city of Trieste, which is also the title of the English edition.<sup>728</sup> Kiš's and Tišma's gloomy and nostalgic imaginaries of *Mittleuropa* had a catalyst function for retrieving formerly suppressed chapters of Yugoslav memory, and as such they took on a model function for authors who wanted to counter the rampant nationalism of the 1990s and early 2000s in both Croatia and Serbia.

It is significant that both in Austria and the successor states of the former Yugoslavia, the fate of the Central European Jews has received increased attention since

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<sup>727</sup> Zorić, "Discordia Concors," 10.

<sup>728</sup> See Daša Drndić, *Sonnenschein* (Zagreb: Fraktura, 2007) and *Trieste*. Transl. Ellen Elias-Bursac (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: 2014).

the political shifts that ensued after 1989. Here, too, things seem to have come full circle. *Mittleuropa*, first established as a literary discourse by Austrian-Jewish intellectuals, has gained new prominence today for Europe's Jewish intellectuals, amongst them a new generation of Jewish-Austrian writers, many of whom have come to Vienna from the former Soviet territories and are revitalizing the discussion around borderlands yet again. The same relevance that Joseph Roth has attributed to the former Habsburg fringes for the creation of a different Europe is now often transposed to the eastern member states of the European Union (and those applying for candidacy). More recent Austrian Jewish authors such as Robert and Eva Menasse, Doron Rabinovici and Robert Schindel demonstrate both a renewal and reinvention of the flourishing Austrian Jewish literary tradition. In the same way that the Waldheim affair has had a watershed effect for gentile Austrian authors such as Christoph Ransmayr, its aftermath has seen a surge of literary productivity for a new generation of Austrian-Jewish authors from the 1990s onward: The second and third Jewish generation unearthed the stories of their parents and grandparents again, which they did not merely confine to an idyllic view of old Habsburg or the trauma of Austria during the Anschluss, but also firmly tied to the Austrian present. A few excellent examples for this are Robert Schindel's *Gebürtig* (1992), Doron Rabinovici's *Ohnehin* (2004), and Eva Menasse's *Vienna* (2005). These writers embrace a Jewish awareness in contemporary Austrian society and the ethical responsibility that comes with it, using it most prominently to align themselves with the new marginalized groups in a globalized Europe: immigrants and minorities, refugees and the disenfranchised. What distinguishes this new generation, among other things, is their high visibility not just as Jewish intellectuals but also as political activists on the liberal-

progressive spectrum. Apart from their literary publications, they have been regular contributors to the political feuilleton, have organized and participated in protest rallies against neo-fascist tendencies and xenophobia in Austria, and have been actively involved in democratic and pacifist organizations, also those that go beyond a merely Jewish agenda. Though they openly identify as Jews in one way or another, they are at the same time extremely wary of all categorization and labeling – their texts therefore engage the question of contemporary Jewish identity within a larger discourse of minorities in an increasingly diverse world, doing so both in a playful and critical manner. This marks a stark difference to iconic Jewish leaders of the immediate literary postwar scene such as Hans Weigel and Friedrich Torberg, who espoused restorative and strongly anti-leftist views and whose stance towards Austrian Nazi collaboration was, to sum it up very crudely, to let bygones be bygones.<sup>729</sup> Against the verdict of some German scholars, who claim that no continuity is discernable between the prewar generation of Jewish intellectuals and their postwar successors, these writers openly avow their place in the Austrian-Jewish literary tradition, while at the same time being well aware of the dangers of Habsburg nostalgia.<sup>730</sup>

This new generation feels more at home in Austria than their parents, while at the same time being the most mobile, maintaining residences and ties to Israel and other European countries. Austria's accession to the European Community in 1994, at a time when the popularity of the right wing FPÖ party was soaring and Anti-Semitism as well

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<sup>729</sup> See for instance Hans Weigel, "The Draped Window," in *Contemporary Jewish Writing in Austria*, ed. Dagmar C.G. Lorenz (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), 61-64.

<sup>730</sup> See Hillary Hope Herzog, "Viennese Jews from Waldheim to Haider and Beyond" in 'Vienna is Different'. *Jewish Writers in Austria from the Fin de Siecle to the Present* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2011) 225-229.

as xenophobia had achieved a new peak, provided the necessary political assurance that Austria, now imbedded within a larger European framework, was indeed once more a haven and home for its Jewish citizens. In an almost ironic twist, the diasporist Jewish writing in Austria has thus turned pro-European again, overcoming the feeling of betrayal both Joseph Roth and Stefan Zweig had expressed in their writings in the 1940s. Many of those second and third generation writers perceive Austria's EU accession as a return to the multiethnic and cosmopolitan landscape of the Habsburg Empire so cherished by their ancestors.<sup>731</sup> In a lecture series organized by the Viennese Burgtheater (part of the same series in which Dubravka Ugrešić presented her essay on Kakanien quoted earlier), Doron Rabinovici expressed understanding for the widespread Jewish postwar nostalgia for Austria-Hungary and thus also the *Mitteleuropa* mindset:

Vielleicht suchten sie in Wien vergeblich nach einer Möglichkeit mit Hilfe der Geschichte die Vergangenheit auszublenden. Womöglich ging es ihnen darum, sich täglich zu vergewissern, nicht vergessen zu haben, was ihnen widerfahren war. Sie mußten sichergehen, daß die Mörder besiegt sind. Die Opfer kehrten an den Tatort zurück. Sie hörten den Henkersknechten beim Schweigen zu. Die Überlebenden trafen einander in den Wiener Kaffeehäusern, die es in Czernowitz, Lemberg, oder Budapest nicht mehr gab. Sie machten Ausflüge zum Semmering und in die Wachau. Sie träumten von Kakanien und von jener Metropole, die einst das Zentrum ihrer Hoffnungen gewesen war. Von der Bukowina aus war Wien der Beginn der Welt gewesen.<sup>732</sup>

According to Rabinovici, such memories of *convivance* and the yearning for a cultural network that unites Central European regions and cities across space and time, particularly in the aftermath of destruction, is what needs to be salvaged for the conflicted

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<sup>731</sup> See Herzog 2011, 228-229, as well as Matti Bunzl, "Austrian Zionism and the Jews of the New Europe," *Jewish Social Studies*. New Series, Vol. 9, No 2, (Winter 2003), 154-173.

<sup>732</sup> Doron Rabinovici, "Es war ein Theater." Speech given on May 27 at the Kasino in Vienna. Accessed at [http://www.burgtheater.at/Content.Node2/home/ueber\\_uns/aktuelles/Rabinovici-formatiertDE.pdf](http://www.burgtheater.at/Content.Node2/home/ueber_uns/aktuelles/Rabinovici-formatiertDE.pdf).

Europe of today: “Kakanien kann zumindest eine Chiffre für eine Fülle an Erfahrungen jenseits der nationalen Einfachheiten sein. Nicht Doppelmonarchie und Hochadel, sondern Doppelsinn und Mehrdeutigkeit gilt es zu bewahren.”<sup>733</sup> It is due to this framework for plurality and tolerance that the Habsburg Jews became known as the Empire’s most loyal citizens, a motif which was taken up repeatedly in the writings of Stefan Zweig, Joseph Roth and Friedrich Torberg. Not coincidentally, Jewish writers were also among the first to envision a secular European citizenship when the Empire became increasingly challenged by emerging nationalist and separatist tendencies; one that differed considerably from the dominant Christian vision of Europe as it was claimed from Novalis to Naumann.<sup>734</sup>

The bitter undertones of the post-Habsburg writers, however, have not been forgotten. More than anything, the *Mitteleuropa* discourse over the last century has exposed the ambivalent relationship Jewish writers have had with a collective vision of Europe. Next to universalist assumptions about common European values, it was the long held Jewish experience of precarious identity and disenfranchisement, as well as the perspective of marginality resulting from it, that defined the discourse of *Mitteleuropa* from the beginning. It explains how bourgeois Jews like Stefan Zweig could claim quintessential Europeanness on one hand, while being stigmatized as the ultimate Oriental menace by Nazi propaganda on the other hand.<sup>735</sup> Echoing Edward Said, Balibar

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<sup>733</sup> Ibid.

<sup>734</sup> Paul Michael Lützeler, ed., *Hoffnung Europa. Deutsche Essays von Novalis bis Enzensberger* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1994).

<sup>735</sup> Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar, ed., *Orientalism and the Jews*. (Lebanon, New Hampshire: Brandeis University Press, 2005).

reminds us that the “hegemonic code” of modern European identity does not only depend on the demarcations set against the non-European “other,” but has come to be increasingly constructed *by this other* as well. And while the traditional role of the outsider was occupied by diasporist, transnational subjects such as Jewish and Gypsy minorities, the “other” against whom postmodern European collectivity defines itself is the illegal migrant.<sup>736</sup> In today’s globalized public sphere, where individual civil societies appear as shaky as the nation states on which they are based, the question of transnational citizenship has acquired new urgency, and it cannot be discussed apart from the idea of Europe.<sup>737</sup> Even though the European continent, as Balibar argues, has historically never been a closed space, its economic promise has turned it into a fortress again, in a direct inversion of the often critically invoked image of Austria-Hungary as a “Völkerkerker“ or prison of the people, which needed to be fled in order to attain national self-determination.

And yet, Balibar also implies that the conflicting processes of inclusion and exclusion open up a new model for European citizenship, one that is aligned with Central European conceptions of *antipolitics* and civil society which I have discussed so far. European citizenship has not been actualized, he argues, because of a limited understanding of the European “*demos*”:

[R]epresentations of Europe as a “quasi-ethnic” community (deriving from one cultural or racial origin) or an “elect civilization” (educating or emancipating mankind) triumph above all because the definition of the “European people” as

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<sup>736</sup> Etienne Balibar, “Ideas of Europe: Civilization and Constitution,” *Iris*, 1 April 2009, 8-9.

<sup>737</sup> Klaus Beyme, “Zivilgesellschaft – Karriere eines Modebegriffs,” *Rupert Carola. Forschungsmagazin* 2/99, accessed on June 12, 2015, at [http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/uni/presse/ruca99\\_2/zivilgesellschaft.htm](http://www.uni-heidelberg.de/uni/presse/ruca99_2/zivilgesellschaft.htm). See also Andrew Arato, “Civil Society” in *ResetDOC*, January 7, 2013, accessed at <http://www.resetdoc.org/story/0000022168>.



political community remain aporetic. *Ethnos* and *laos*, in the case of a construction of Europe, are mainly substitutes for a missing *demos* [...].<sup>738</sup>

The evocation and construction of this “missing *demos*,” in the form of an engaged literary collective, is what *Mittleuropa* writing since 1945 has been all about. It fits Balibar’s description of *demos* as a socio-cultural network for change:

Such a *demos* is not a statistical notion, made of groups or individuals, it is a combination of “movements,” “agencies” and “struggles” (which may be rooted in social conditions, and probably always are, but act as political forces, not so much *expressing* political positions as *expanding* the frontiers of the political in a polemical manner). This is what I call the *insurgent* moment of democracy, in order to highlight the continuities traversing the history of the nation state – i.e. preceding it (in the classical “cities”) and transgressing its limits (in the new emerging trans-national public sphere).<sup>739</sup>

As a literary discourse that has been defined by the margins and the marginalized since the interwar period, *Mittleuropa* has offered alternative venues to subvert hegemonic narratives. The common denominator of its texts and practices has been a positioning against closed systems such as the nation state, totalitarian ideologies and traditional historiography.

But if a unity of territory, language and culture cannot be assumed anymore (an observation that the writers of *Mittleuropa* have made long ago) then what is it that makes claims to a European identity still so persistent and attractive? I would argue that it is the indebtedness to a common cultural memory, which takes into account the high cost of totalitarian utopias and firmly opposes any tendencies to gloss over or edit the chapters of European history that were part of it. As I have demonstrated through my examination of Austrian and (post-)Yugoslav authors within the span of a whole century, *Mittleuropa*

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<sup>738</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>739</sup> Ibid., 14-15.

literature acknowledges the subjectivity of memory, as well as the sentimental distortions that may result from it. At the same time, it seeks to undermine the often subtle, and yet large-scale editing of cultural memory, most prominently in the aftermath of the Second World War and of the Cold War. By juxtaposing memories of confinement and terror to those of multicultural circulation and *convivance*, be it from the Habsburg Empire or Socialist Yugoslavia, the writings of *Mittleuropa* offer a blueprint of Europe that could be more than just a gathering place of forfeited ideals: a space not just of fragmentation, but of also piecing together, not just of loss but also of regained connection. The fact that migrants today are still willing to risk their lives for the promise of Europe makes *Mittleuropa* all the more relevant: both in its utopian vision of what a European reality could be, and in its admonishment of what it should not become again.

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