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‘A Feast for the [Cold-War] Imagination’: Liminal Eastern Europe in the Writings of John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates and Philip Roth

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Inspired by the well-established trope of Eastern Europe’s in-betweenness, this article uses the notion of liminality to explore the images of Eastern Europe during the Cold War in the works of three American authors: John Updike, Joyce Carol Oates and Philip Roth. Not only do these works map Eastern Europe as liminal in the imagological sense of the term, that is, as oscillating between competing narratives of otherness and familiarity; empathy and hostility; the East and the West, but also the very experience of venturing behind the Iron Curtain is charged with potentiality: the Eastern-European cityscape becomes the contact zone between cultures and the locus of self-discovery for the American characters. The resultant imaginative geography is at once contemporary and allochronic; political and personal, as it reiterates the Cold War balance of power while at the same time recycling existing representations of the area and reflecting the authors’ sensibilities.

> The American sojourner
> in East Europe:
> where we are ‘not ourselves.’
> Cultural ambassadors,
> emissaries of art,
> sincerity . . .
> Our heads ring with too many bells
> extolling too much history.

Gamely persisting in handshakes,
smiling through translators,
staring at tiny withered apples
heaped in sidewalk bins –
a feast! a feast! –
for the imagination.

(Joyce Carol Oates, 1989, ‘Miniatures: East Europe’)

The fragment that opens this article belongs to the poem inspired by Joyce Carol Oates’s 1980 journey to Eastern Europe as an official American cultural emissary. Like the other two authors discussed in this article, John Updike and Philip Roth, Oates travelled behind the Iron Curtain and channelled her experience into fiction. The poem evokes the figure of ‘the American sojourner’ who, under different guises, is central to the works of the three authors, acting as a fictional conduit for their respective impressions of Eastern Europe, which the poem calls ‘a feast! – for the imagination.’ The poet’s strategic use of the hyphen seems to suggest that while the ‘feast’ that Eastern Europe offers the American sojourner is not of a material kind, it nevertheless feeds her imagination with its overwhelming history (‘too much history’) and complex cultural realities. What is lost in translation (‘smiling through translators’) is otherwise compensated for with the imagined: all the works studied in this article refract facts through the lens of fiction, offering a fictionalized testimony to the American encounters with Eastern Europe – as a geopolitical space and a mental category – during the Cold War.

Taking its cue from Oates’s poem, this article analyses Eastern Europe as a feast for the imagination of Updike, Oates and Roth,[a] all of whom ventured behind the Iron Curtain between the 1960s and the 1980s. Pointing out some interesting parallels among the literary images of Eastern Europe created by Updike, Oates and Roth, respectively, it argues that these authors shape Eastern Europe into a liminal space on the threshold between the East and the West, which proves familiar enough for the characters to feel a sense of kinship with and sympathy for the people they meet, yet remains sufficiently removed from home to produce a sense of exoticism/otherness, risk and contingency. The latter qualities are inextricably linked to the imagological charge of Eastern Europe – that is, existent Western cultural representations of the area, particularly those related to the Second World War and the atrocities of the Holocaust, which are intertwined with contemporary communist realities.

The idea of Eastern Europe as liminal is not new. Although Larry Wolff does not apply this category to the area in *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, he does speak of ‘the sense of geographical liminality’ with respect to the position that Eastern Europe occupied on the imaginative map of the Enlightenment (Wolff 1994: 210). According to Wolff, Western enlightened intellectuals and philosophers invented the idea of Eastern Europe by associating and comparing individual nations with one another and juxtaposing them with Europe proper, that is, Western Europe. As a consequence, Eastern Europe was mapped as a ‘paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion, Europe but not

Europe' (Wolff 1994: 7), or a middle point on the gradation scale between Western civilization and Eastern barbarism. Writing in the aftermath of the collapse of communism, Wolff argues that the post-Second World War image of Eastern Europe as peripheral and marginal hides 'the traces of an intellectual history that invented the idea of Eastern Europe long before' (Wolff 1994: 4).

Eastern Europe's liminal location and condition before and after 1989 is evoked by Steven Tötösy de Zepetnek (1999), who speaks of the area's 'in-between peripherality'. Not only does this term evoke Eastern Europe's intermediate geopolitical situation between the two opposing centres: Western Europe and the Soviet Union, as well as the area's historical, cultural and political marginality resulting from a long record of external oppression and occupation, but it also provides a framework to analyse Eastern European literatures as reflecting said condition. In other words, while Wolff is concerned with external mappings, Tötösy de Zepetnek is interested in Eastern Europe's self-referential perspective on its liminal condition and its manifestations in national literatures. Nevertheless, both authors attest to the analytical potential of in-betweenness for the study of Eastern Europe, whether seen from the external, imagological perspective or the internal, self-referential point of view.

Indeed, in the writings from and about Eastern Europe, in-between peripherality is a recurrent motif. For instance, for Milan Kundera, the very epithet 'Eastern' connotes marginality which the Soviet dominion imposed on Poles, Hungarians, Czechs and Slovaks – the nations 'which had always considered themselves to be Western', but which in 1945 'woke up to discover that they were now in the East' (Kundera 1984: 33). Writing for the West in 1983 (the essay was originally published in *Le Debát* and then translated into English for *The New York Review of Books*), Kundera is keen to stress the area's inseparability from Europe and emphasize its cultural idiosyncrasy over the arbitrary association with Soviet Russia: the ultimate embodiment of the East in the bipolar geography of the Cold War. To mark the distance between Soviet Russia and its satellites, he replaces the reductionist label of 'Eastern Europe' with a more expansive and culturally rich 'Central Europe', placing cultural heritage (represented by the likes of Kafka and Gombrowicz) above political frontiers. Yet, ultimately, the memory of the political divisions has proved more durable: 'Central Europe' has never quite supplanted 'Eastern Europe' in the Western lexicon. Therefore, even if the cultural category of Central Europe is at times implicitly evoked in the works by Updike, Roth and Oates, I will keep using the term 'Eastern Europe' not only because it points to the area's ties to Soviet Russia as much as to its connection to Europe – and thus its in-between peripherality – but also because it is still common in the American press and scholarship on the former Eastern Bloc countries.

In choosing to read Eastern Europe as liminal, I draw on several characteristics which have come to be associated with the concept of liminality. The above-mentioned in-betweenness is of course the most salient yet hardly the only feature of the limen. More than merely connote the quality of interstitiality, liminality evokes fluidity, ambiguity, contradiction and potentiality, among others. The concept originally traces back to ethnography and Arnold van Gennep's work on the tripartite structure of rites of passage (1909), whose middle stage (transition) he classified as liminal. Despite his innovative contribution, van Gennep's work remained neglected until the 1960s. It was rediscovered by British ethnographer, Victor W. Turner, who popularized and expanded upon van Gennep's contribution on liminality, exploring it beyond rituals. In Turner's work, liminality, which can be manifested in both people and phenomena, collapses binary oppositions, among which there are structure and anti-structure; inferiority and superiority; chaos vs. creation and generative and transformative power vs. potential risk and threat. Essentially, ambiguity and paradox are liminality's defining features, as is generative potential which, however, should not obscure liminality's darker facets: risk and threat which certain unstructured and transitional conditions, events or entities may engender.

As an avid reader of world literature, Turner recognized aspects of liminality in certain literary characters and the creative process itself. In literary studies, liminality and related qualities have since been used to explore threshold personae, such as tricksters, as well as productive tensions between centre and periphery in postcolonial cultures – as in Homi Bhabha's work on cultural hybridity – among others. In this sense, Tötösy de Zepetnek's conceptualization of Eastern Europe in terms of in-between peripherality is one of the earliest applications of postcolonial paradigms to the study of (post-) Cold-War cultures.[b] Moreover, liminality and liminal qualities have been recognized in space, place and landscape, whether physical, metaphorical or textual, for instance the metaphor of a looking glass or literature as the product of a 'contact zone' where cultures 'meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power' (Pratt 1991: 34).

Liminality proves to have a productive potential for the study of literature from the perspective of cultural contact, interaction and tension, thus challenging the popular, and rather superficial, understanding of the liminal as anything that lies betwixt and between two entities. While in-betweenness, which references the middle stage in a rite of passage, seems like a valid precondition for a place or a phenomenon to be theorized as liminal, what is perhaps more relevant is what *happens* in the interstices and what it may tell us about the people, places or cultures involved. It is with this premise in mind that I will now approach Eastern Europe's literary images in the texts by Oates, Updike and Roth: to examine what these images communicate about the Cold-War cultural dynamics at the time.

Updike's, Oates's and Roth's representations of Eastern Europe cannot be divorced from the geopolitical and cultural context in which they were conceived. From the American perspective, the Iron Curtain split the world into the West and the East; the democratic and the communist, and the free and the oppressed. While this Cold-War polarization informs the American authors' representations of Eastern Europe, they are problematized by Eastern Europe itself, which is neither Europe proper nor Soviet Russia, although it displays affinities with both. Moreover, in the case of Updike's and Oates's texts, ambiguity and paradox are made even more salient given the role which these authors undertook behind the Iron Curtain: both Updike and Oates travelled to Eastern Europe under the auspices of the American State Department as cultural ambassadors. While officially their mission consisted in furthering better understanding between the US and the USSR and its satellites, there might have been another underlying purpose behind the initiative: to promote free-world culture and thus contribute to undermining Soviet communism. Although it is hard to determine to what extent Updike and Oates complied with this hidden agenda, their short stories, albeit quite different in mode, reveal tensions between the official and the private which the ambiguous character of their respective diplomatic missions might have engendered.

A case in point is Updike's short story 'Rich in Russia', first published in 1970. The story features a Jewish-American author, Henry Bech, who just like his creator did in 1964, travels to Moscow as an official US cultural ambassador. Notably, 'Rich in Russia' sets the tone for Bech's exploits in the countries of the Eastern Bloc: Romania, Bulgaria and, two decades later, Czechoslovakia.

Interestingly, the story entertains two distinct yet interconnected representations of the Eastern other. One evokes the image of a timeless, romanticized mother Russia that reminds Bech of his bygone immigrant childhood: 'There, in Russia, [...] Bech did find a quality of life – impoverished yet ceremonial, shabby yet ornate, sentimental, embattled, and avuncular – reminiscent of his neglected Jewish past' (Updike 2006: 13).[c] Already on board the Aeroflot, Bech finds himself on the threshold between the present and the past as the plane smells 'like his uncles' backrooms in Williamsburg, of swaddled body heat and proximate potatoes boiling' (Updike 2006: 12). The sensation of entering a separate spatial-temporal realm is intensified once Bech realizes that time flows differently in Russia, expanding into 'steppes', which seem to mirror the country's melancholy landscape (Updike 2006: 145). Nostalgia for the past, especially as far as culture is concerned, also permeates Bech's Moscow apartment which is bedecked with photographs of Jewish luminaries: Kafka, Einstein, Freud and Wittgenstein, 'pointedly evoking the glory of pre-Hitlerian *Judenkultur*' (Updike 2006: 12). In a curious imagological move, Updike incorporates the past into the present and Russia into (pre-war Central) Europe, charting an ample liminal space capable of accommodating different spatial and temporal dimensions and reconnecting Bech with his neglected Jewishness.

Along this representation, there exists a different, much more politicized one spurred by Bech's diplomatic assignment. In compliance with his role as the promoter of the American culture and lifestyle, Bech refracts the Soviet Union through a polarized Cold-War lens, reducing the relationship between his homeland and the USSR to simplistic oppositions, such as abundance vs. paucity. Although at no point does Bech openly express his preference for capitalism and democracy, his performance mocks the communist system and particularly the control it wields over artistic expression: Bech falsely praises a garish socialist-realist painting and declares Nabokov to be 'America's best living writer' (Updike 2006: 17) in front of official Soviet writers. All in all, Bech's performance not only exposes the equivocal nature of his diplomatic mission but also hints at Updike's ambivalent attitude towards the Eastern other, which is at once homely and worthy of sympathy, and (ideologically) inimical.

Notably, Bech's image of Soviet Russia possesses vividness and power that its satellites lack. When Bech visits Romania, it is clear that he is not only ignorant of the country's history and culture but also largely uninterested in learning anything about them. In all fairness, neither is the American embassy in Bucharest particularly willing to provide him with that kind of education. Accordingly, in 'Bech in Rumania' the country is mapped as obscure, backward and (implicitly) anti-Semitic. Unlike Russia, Romania exudes hostility and obscurantism: 'Yet there had been a tough and heroic naïveté in Russia that he missed here, where something shrugging and effete seemed to leave room for a vein of energetic evil' (Updike 2006: 37). The latter materializes in the figure of a party chauffeur designated to drive Bech around, whose reckless, disturbing behaviour reminds Bech of 'the late Adolf Hitler, kept alive by Count Dracula' (Updike 2006: 35). To alleviate the sense of apprehension and confusion which this obscure nation produces in him, Bech employs mockery and stereotyping, reading Romania through the *place myth* of Transylvania, which in time extended upon the whole of Romania, as a remote, superstitious region situated on the margins of Europe and haunted by vampiric presences, the most recognizable of which being of course Count Vlad Dracula (Light 2008). Interestingly, in the twentieth century, 'Count Dracula proved a highly adaptable enemy,' conveniently used to represent first Nazi Germany and later 'the threat posed by Soviet Communism to the capitalist, democratic West' (Light 2008: 13). In Bech's imaginative geography of Romania, these two enemies are combined to render the country almost as obscure and menacing as it used to be at the turn of the century.

The motif of inter-temporality or timelessness is also present in Joyce Carol Oates's short story 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner', which is set in West Berlin. The story evokes the most literal embodiment of the Iron Curtain: the Berlin Wall, whose materiality seems to be the only reminder that there is a world beyond the West. In fact, if it was not for the Wall, West Berlin, with its heavy traffic, frantic tourism and sordid nightlife could pass for an American city; 'an oasis of sparkling West in the glum barbed-wire East' (Oates 1985: 100). At the same time, the Wall is a curious presence in itself not only because of its status as a limen separating one socio-political reality from the other (Borcila 2015: 23) but also because of what happens at this threshold.

The story is narrated by a nameless American man who comes to West Berlin to find out what had driven his brother to approach the Wall from the East – for which he was shot to death. Rather than find the answers he is looking for, he becomes gradually entrapped in Berlin's uncanny atmosphere and tantalized by the Wall to the point of obsession. Although the story remains open-ended, it is implied that the narrator may follow in his brother's footsteps and yield to the Wall's deadly, almost erotic appeal: 'note how the pulse helplessly quickens, no matter how the mind intones *you are safe on this side*, [. . .], note how the heart grows tumescent, how vision is sharpened, the very air rings with delight' (Oates 1985: 110). As Oates reverses history by making Westerners instead of Easterners risk their life at the foot of the Wall, she universalizes the Berlin Wall, turning it into 'a threshold of unpredictable dynamics' (Benito Sánchez and Manzanas 2006: 2) at which life and death drives compete against each other. In this sense, the Wall transgresses the Cold War, for '[a]s one nears the Wall [. . .], history is left behind' (Oates 1985: 106), surrendering to the perennial dance between Eros and Thanatos.

Inasmuch as the Wall disrupts Berlin's apparent invulnerability, the city itself is revealed to be much seedier than its glitzy Western veneer would suggest. The imagological charge of Nazi atrocities blends in with the Cold-War atmosphere of suspicion and hostility: the narrator thinks his bunker-like room is under surveillance and, in an ultimate instance of paranoia, imagines 'poisonous gases' being filtered in (Oates 1985: 108). Importantly, both the Wall and the memory of the Second World War problematize American post-war political mythology, by virtue of which Berlin became 'closely linked to what was defined as the United States' unique mission in the world' (Daum 2000: 56). Instead of being '[a] jewel afloat upon the sea of [Soviet] darkness' (Oates 1985: 108), Berlin is a wounded city and a persistent reminder of the West's finitude. In fact, in the last story of the collection, 'Our Wall', Oates conjures a world in which the post-war division of the continent has never come to an end. In this dystopian vision, what used to be East Berlin/Eastern Europe is construed as an allegory of captivity, whereas the Berlin Wall/Iron Curtain is essentialized into 'the philosophical underpinning [. . .] of all walls' (Jong 1984: n.p.).

Eastern Europe assumes a more concrete shape in 'My Warszawa: 1980', which dramatizes the Polish capital. That said, Eastern Europe remains removed from Europe proper not only because of its political system but also because of its historical traumas – as one of the story's characters declares, 'East Europe is a strain on anyone's nerves' (Oates 1985: 146). Like Updike's Bech stories, Oates's 'My Warszawa: 1980' alludes to America's cultural mission behind the Iron Curtain: the protagonist, American writer Judith Horne, comes to Warsaw to participate in a conference on American literature. Accordingly, the events of the story unfold against the backdrop of luncheons, meetings and dinners – the usual setting of amicable (if somewhat perfunctory) cultural diplomacy. The mocking tone of Updike's stories, however, is not to be found in Oates's work. Not unlike the narrator of 'Ich Bin Ein Berliner', Judith Horne is deeply affected by the city and its inhabitants. Under the influence of Warsaw's oppressive smoke-filled air and melancholy urban landscape, Judith's wonted strong and rational self gives way to a more fragile and vulnerable one. This transformation, which is simultaneously a process of self-discovery, is, as usual in this part of the world, related to the city's recent historical scars, still detectable in the cityscape, which acquire a more personal dimension in light of Judith's Polish Jewish origins: 'She feels weak. She feels Jewish at last. And womanly – in the very worst sense of the word. A Jew, a woman, a victim – can it be?' (Oates 1985: 148).[d]

Interestingly, Eastern Europe's transformative potential – its capacity to 'undo' the character by bringing her face to face with her hitherto unacknowledged trauma, fears and insecurities – is associated with dirt and pollution. Warsaw is a contaminated city whose foul air envelops Judith with '[l]ayers of grime, flakes, near-invisible bits of dirt' (Oates 1985: 178) which she cannot seem to wash off. The unpleasant sensation of being dirty is exacerbated by a sense of confusion and mental fog which renders Judith's behaviour chaotic and awkward. As Maria Todorova (2009) observes drawing on Mary Douglas's scholarship on purity and danger, since dirt is a synonym of disorder, any behaviour or phenomena which escape clear categorization may be perceived as potentially insecure and dangerous. By the same token, Eastern Europe's in-between peripherality combined with its tragic destiny – '[b]oxed in by the Germans on one side and the Russians on the other' (Kundera 1984: 34) – makes it difficult to apprehend and relate to and thus confusing and minacious.

In addition to partaking in the imagological tradition of representing Eastern Europe through the lens of its tragic history,[e] Oates's story engages with the object of the Western intellectual interest in Eastern Europe: cultural and literary dissidence. As a member of the American delegation, Judith is introduced to dissident authors and activists whom she commiserates with and feels compelled to help. Judith's concern may mirror Oates's who, along with John Updike, was one of various American authors recruited by Philip Roth to assist dissident Czechoslovak authors financially (Bailey 2021: 384).

Roth's well-known engagement with Eastern Europe, which he meaningfully termed 'the Other Europe', forms the backdrop of his 1985 novella, *The Prague Orgy*, which explores the subject of the uneasy marriage between literature and politics and questions the situation of the writer under different political systems. Unlike his fellow writers Updike and Oates, Roth first travelled behind the Iron Curtain privately in 1972. Roth's primary motivation was to visit Prague, the city of Kafka, with whom he felt a special affinity in his 30s, yet his stay in Prague unexpectedly spurred other literary connections. Roth's acquaintance with dissident authors not only provided him with an education in cultural repression, but also served as an entryway into the literary universe of Eastern Europe. Roth later took it upon himself to rediscover the literary gems of the area for the American public: he became the editor of a Penguin book series, 'Writers from the Other Europe', which included works by Bruno Schulz, Milan Kundera, Danilo Kís and György Konrád, among others. To further showcase these works, Roth enlisted prominent American and international authors, such as John Updike, to pen introductions.

In *The Prague Orgy*, the Czech capital functions as a liminal *contact zone* where the Other Europe and America – but also the past and the present – are bridged thanks to literature. Indeed, it is literature that makes the novella's protagonist, Jewish-American author Nathan Zuckerman, temporarily renounce his comfortable US existence to venture behind the Iron Curtain. He does so to recover the unpublished manuscripts of a Jewish author who perished in the Holocaust: the father of a banned Czech writer, Zdenek Sisovsky, whose dramatic Eastern European story blends contemporary cultural oppression with past traumas. Yet, Zuckerman's quest to save Sisovsky's (and the world's) literary patrimony, unexpectedly brings him in touch with his own heritage. Not unlike Henry Bech, Zuckerman is transported back in time as Prague reminds him of a prototypical Jewish homeland he imagined as a child when collecting money for the Jewish National Fund and listening to his relatives' stories about the Old World. Such a city would be 'a used city, a broken city, a city so worn and grim that nobody else would even put in a bid' (Roth 1995: 62), but at the same time it would be rich in narrative currency: 'endless stories' woven out of 'exertions of survival' (Roth 1995: 63). Prague is thus more than a city, it is a city-text – a palimpsest – in which stories, those of yesteryear and those of today, 'aren't simply stories; it's what they have instead of life' (Roth 1995: 64). In this, somewhat exalted, vision, *Eastern* Europe gives way to *Central* Europe as literature becomes the antidote to the crudeness and absurdity of life under communism.

As in the other stories discussed in this article, the Other Europe is mapped as existing beyond the present moment and thus as capable of affecting the character in unexpected ways. Not only does Zuckerman metaphorically travel back in time, but he also imagines what his life would be like if he were a writer in the European East. Faced with the absurd world of communist cultural repression where dissident writers are reduced to doing menial jobs, he imagines a transformation of almost Kafkaesque dimensions:

> *As Nathan Zuckerman awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a sweeper of floors in a railway café [. . .], a superfluous person with no responsibilities and nothing to do, he has the kind of good times you have in Dante's Inferno.* (Roth 1995: 80, italics in original)[f]

Yet, what is but an exercise in imagination, turns into a tangible threat. Zuckerman finds himself followed and accosted by the secret police who confiscate the precious manuscript, thus thwarting his benevolent mission for the sake of world literature. The Other Europe's liminal structurelessness pulls Zuckerman in, making him believe that anything is possible in this strange place, even his transformation from an audacious novelist into 'a cultural eminence elevated by the literary deeds he performs' (Roth 1995: 84). Soon enough, however, it spits him out as it turns out that he has been but a pawn in a game larger than himself: the very story which set him in motion turns out to be Sisovsky's fabrication; a piece of 'strategically devised fiction' (Roth 1995: 84) for literary idealists.

In *The Prague Orgy*, Roth complicates Zuckerman's preconceptions about Eastern Europe as a gloomy land of perpetual oppression and misery. Instead, Prague emerges as a puzzling, contradictory space which escapes easy categorizations. Located on the margin of Western political consciousness, it is nevertheless central as far as culture is concerned: in Roth's novella, pre-war Central European heritage blends in with contemporary storytelling and shines through the darkness of the Iron Curtain. That said, the novella alludes to some of the recurrent motifs in representing the area, including inter-temporality, unpredictable dynamics and wartime traumas, all of which shape the American image of Eastern Europe as much as its communist realities.

All of the stories discussed here demonstrate that exploring Eastern Europe is at the same time a form of inner voyaging for the American characters. In this sense, crossing the Iron Curtain, whether as a cultural diplomat or an intellectual tourist, becomes commensurate with entering a realm where the customary (Western) order is dissolved and new configurations emerge. Thus, Henry Bech reconnects with his past, Judith Horne (painfully) rediscovers her identity, whereas the nameless American in Berlin finds himself succumbing to the Wall's irresistible deadly allure. In a truly liminal fashion, Eastern Europe is at once familiar and menacing; homely and hostile. Although geographically and culturally it pertains to Europe, it is also 'an occupied zone' (Oates 1985: 163) still haunted by the memory of recent suffering. In other words, Eastern Europe is, to quote Arpad Szakolczai (2001), arrested in the state of 'permanent liminality' in which the Second World War never came to an end, but metamorphosed into a regime which exploited the area's post-war vulnerability to further oppress it. Therefore, it does not come as a surprise that the Jewish heritage of the American characters provides a connection to the Other Europe, while at the same time complicating their encounters with the past as unhealed wounds and unacknowledged traumas are brought to the fore.

Simultaneously, by virtue of being the Soviet Union's sphere of influence, Eastern Europe is mapped as shabby, obscure and marginal; a distorted mirror image of Western progress and democracy. As John Updike remarks about his character in 'The Bulgarian Poetess', in which Bech visits Sofia, '[a]t times, [. . .] Bech felt he had passed through a mirror, a dingy flecked mirror that reflected feebly the capitalist world; in its dim depths everything was similar but left-handed' (Updike 2006: 46). Indeed, the very experience of moving across the Other Europe may be termed 'trans-specular' (Sutton 2006: 140). In Oates's 'Old Budapest',[g] the journey behind the Iron Curtain is associated with 'the queer intoxicating air of suspension' (Oates 1985: 207) whereas Eastern Europe itself is half-romanticized and half-patronized into 'a twilit world beyond the looking-glass' through which the American characters stride in 'queer elation' (1985: 194). The difference between them and the inhabitants of the world beyond the looking glass lies in their nationalities: whereas the American sojourners are free to leave it at any time – Eastern Europe being for them but a transitory experience – the 'tragic countries' (Oates 1985: 208) of Eastern Europe remain trapped in the state of permanent liminality. In this sense, Eastern Europe is thus both a liminal realm where new scenarios are enacted and (self-)discoveries made and a looking glass reflecting the Cold-War balance of power. That said, the Cold-War Orientalizing of Eastern Europe as backward and marginal is problematized and mitigated by the authors' first-hand experience of the area: their understanding of their position vis-à-vis their hosts, their sympathy for Eastern Europeans' resilience in the face of adversity and a genuine appreciation for their cultures as a form of resistance 'against the coercion of the powers-that-be' (Roth 1995: 64).

In conclusion, in mapping Eastern Europe, Updike, Oates and Roth re-invent the area for the American imaginary, reflecting the underlying grids of power between the US and the USSR and bringing to the fore time-specific phenomena, such as the Western intellectual fascination with dissident literature and the resultant inquiry about the social role of the writer. Simultaneously, they keep recycling existent representations, the most prominent of which have to do with the Second World War and the Holocaust. The result is an emotionally charged imaginative geography which shapes Eastern Europe into 'a Rorschach test for Western wishes, dreads and misunderstandings' (Hoffman 1994: xii) while at the same time contributing to the discussion on different facets of Eastern Europe's in-betweenness.

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The author declares none.

Notes

[a] All the quotations from individual stories by Updike and Oates come from *The Complete Henry Bech* and *Last Days: Stories*, respectively.

[b] For the discussion of the uses of postcolonial theory to analyse East Central European cultures, see for instance Kołodziejczyk and Şandru (2016) or Bryla (2021).

[c] For a discussion of the American images of Russia in the twentieth century see, for instance, Chatterjee and Holmgren (2013).

[d] The subject of the erased Jewish presence which keeps haunting Eastern Europe is also central to Updike's 'Bech in Czech', in which the eponymous novelist travels to Prague, whose cityscape, leaden with history, causes him to develop a visceral fear of annihilation (Bryla 2020).

[e] See for instance Zacharasiewicz (1995).

[f] For a discussion of Roth's stand on the relationship between literature and politics and the social responsibility of a writer, see Bryla (2020).

[g] For a detailed exploration of the liminal dynamics in this story, see Bryla (2017).

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