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## Trespassers and Stowaways After the Wall. The European East–West Divide in Emil Tode’s *Border State*

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### A persistent border

Emil Tode’s remarkable novel *Border State* is part of a wave of post-1989 fiction (in literature and cinema) from the post-communist realm of Europe that explores persistent divides in the continent, even when the actual Cold War border is no longer there. Contrary to grandiloquent talk in geopolitics suggesting a regained freedom of movement, these fictions have their protagonists travel between Eastern and Western Europe in a secretive way, as trespassers and stowaways, as if the old divide is still effective. The best known example might be Krzysztof Kieślowski’s movie *Blanc* (1994), part of the *Trois Couleurs*-trilogy, in which the main hero Karol Karol, a former champion hairdresser and now the financially broke, sexually impotent lover to his French ex-wife, flies back to Warsaw from Paris hiding in a suitcase.<sup>1</sup> In the case of the novel under scrutiny here, *Border State*, first published in 1993 in Tallinn, Estonia, we are presented with a fugitive, a murderer, who confesses to his crime in letters sent to a certain Angelo, who might very well be an invented addressee. The victim is Franz, resident of Paris, where the murder also takes place, and a Franco-German professor of philosophy. The murderer is from Eastern Europe, probably from Estonia - but just probably -, which saw its independence newly restored in 1991. As a translator of French poetry he is visiting France on a EU-scholarship. The motive for the murder is quite vague: the I is disenchanted with the free, capitalist West; especially with the nihilism that, as he discovers, seems to be at the heart of the European project of political integration. His victim, also his lover, embodies the failure to deliver a bright, new European future.

When I write that we are presented with this story of a confessor, one should add that with the considerable international success of the novel, translation significantly adds to the complex question of the implied audience of this fictional confession. The Europe of *Border State* is divided between the former East and the current West; the same might be said for the reading audience in the real Europe after the fall of communism. What might be a realistic story of cultural denigration for readers who share in the post-communist experience, may seem an exaggerated, malicious fantasy for readers in the West. There is a masterful play with cultural stereotypes at the heart of this tension, which the novel never quite resolves. Instead, use of the unreliable narrator only enhances

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this ambiguity. Moreover, the writer<sup>2</sup>, in a piece of non-fiction written for *Alter Ego* (2004), a book commissioned by the Amsterdam-based European Cultural Foundation for the occasion of the 2004 EU enlargement, signaled that real and unreal, when applied to Europe before and after the end of communism, are fundamentally subjective categories:

I was born in a phantom state. It didn't really exist anymore, and you could feel it. Everything in that Soviet Union of the 1970s, and especially of the 80s, was so unreal. I longed so much for reality, and thought naively that that reality could be found on the other side. But if one side of two disappears, everything becomes one side. So there was no place for reality anymore. I mean, it was like a contamination. It was like the ultimate revenge of the 'East', of the losers – to contaminate the West, the winners, with its unreality. (40)

In this essay I will explore the space-making effect of the unreliable narration in *Border State*, on a continent that is itself subject to a tectonic ontological uncertainty. The novel imagines a geography for post-1989 Europe where, in a way, at least on the discursive map, the wall still stands. Already the original Estonian title of *Border State*, 'Piiririik', suggested persistence of border: 'Piir means border, boundary, frontier, threshold, limit, end, terminus, line, borderline. Riik is a state, body politic, nation, country, community, kingdom, domain, realm, empire, government. Thus, 'Piiririik' could be translated in so many ways (as Boundary Nation, Border State, Limit Realm, etc)' (Jaanus 2006, pp 227). The persistence of a divide in fiction is of course in contradiction with the proclamation, in political discourse, of a Europe without frontiers.<sup>3</sup> How does such a discursive reality relate to the real, physical configuration of borders in the continent? According to Péteri:

Symbolic geographies reveal how human agents, in particular historical and cultural contexts, define themselves by locating themselves spatially as well as temporally [...] What makes these socially and historically situated processes really important is their intimate relationship to the formation of identities, and indeed, to identity politics (including the regular attempts in all kinds of modern political regimes to manage identities through the projection of images about themselves and the others' (2)

There was an actual wall, which was taken down as of November 1989, and there were mental divides, non-material walls, such as those in language. These non-material divides can be studied, I propose, for instance in spatial metaphor in discourse, whether political or literary (they occur in both, of course). Tode's novel provides a case in point. It signals a divided European context, criticizes it (and perhaps reifies it, a question to which I will return at the end of this essay). But how does this critique work in a context – post-1989 Europe – that lacks any common ground with Western-Europe considering itself 'the self-understood and self-declared heir to the European Enlightenment project of democracy, liberty, equality and progress' (Crnković 178), and Eastern-Europe, in the words of the narrator of *Border State*, as a realm of still-born history, from a 'dying century' (7)? The hypothesis of this essay is, then, that these contradictory configurations emerge from, and are being inscribed in, a discursive map shaped by, amongst others, metaphors with a remarkably long-durée quality, such as 'the wall' and 'the Iron Curtain'.<sup>4</sup>

### The Iron Curtain as foundational metaphor

When, on 5 March 1946 on the stage of Westminster College, Fulton, Missouri, Winston Churchill framed a new European political boundary-in-the-making with the metaphor of the 'Iron Curtain'<sup>5</sup>, this phrase of choice was by no means a stylistic innovation of the

temporarily retired British statesman.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to popular belief, it already had a history and seemed to have become a dead metaphor: a word or phrase ‘that has lost its metaphoric force through common usage’ (Webster). Still, I would argue, it was not completely dead. Rather, it exerted its reality-making influence as one of the fundamental spatial configurations of the Cold War mental map of Europe (perhaps even of the globe), in the way that Lakoff and Johnson speak of conventional metaphor, ‘where much of our ordinary conceptual system and the bulk of our everyday conventional language are structured and understood primarily in metaphorical terms’ (Lakoff and Johnson, pp 453).

With the metaphor doing its conventional, day-to-day work, as it were, what configuration was unfolded? A divide, to be sure. But a very specific one. One should bear in mind that the actual Berlin Wall, which as a metonym, a *totum pro parte*, would become a serious rival for the Iron Curtain in political and popular speech (as ‘the Wall’), had not yet come into existence. The Iron Curtain, on the other hand, always remained mere metaphor in the discursive battlefield of the Cold War. Its original usage goes back to a device, made either of asbestos, gauze, or, indeed, iron, to protect theatres from the blazing fires that occurred frequently in the second half of the nineteenth century. Salient fact is that so effective were some of these devices that at some point there rose concern for the increasingly forgotten people “on the other side” (Wright 73). Its life as a metaphor started during World War I, occurring in countless contexts lacking a definitive meaning and by no means restricted to perceived distinctions between East and West in Europe.<sup>7</sup>

The divide suggested by the Iron Curtain metaphor implied safety for those on this side of the stage, preventing the fire from ravaging the whole of the theatre and killing everyone inside. This inequality is of a tragic nature, due to *vis major*: faced with a cause that is natural, one feels helpless on this side of the curtain, and great sadness for those stuck on the other side. If not wholly innocent perhaps, one can at least discard direct responsibility: the curtain had to come down, otherwise all would have perished in the fire: ‘for [Churchill] it was also a firewall, a metaphor of containment. It ended with an ominous clang the drama of the Second World War, but by stabilizing the division of the Continent, it also prevented a holocaust’ (Rose pp 397) – a holocaust for those on *this* side of the curtain.

‘The Wall’, as metaphor, offered a different kind of divide: even when it matters greatly on which side of the wall one ends up, the thing itself looks in principle the same from both sides: concrete, or bricks. It does instill a rigid division in two sides, of course, in *us* and *them*. The wall, therefore, as a conventional metaphor, denotes total invisibility, resulting in indifference for those on the other side. As such, it seems to be at work behind British foreign secretary Douglas Hurd’s notorious statement from December 1989 that the East–West divide in Europe had been a system ‘under which we’ve lived quite happily for 40 years’ (Judt pp 639). The Iron Curtain works differently as a conventional metaphor. Historians of the Cold War agree that Churchill’s speech furthered a divide that was still *in statu nascendi*.<sup>8</sup> In any case, the metaphor took off from the Westminster gymnasium and found countless stages all over the globe, where it was repeated, quoted, commented upon, and whether hailed or refuted, inescapably unfolded its geography, accelerating ‘the discursive shift toward the Cold War’ (Costigliola 406).

In the spatial configuration of this metaphor (which also started to connote a historical narrative, as time proceeded), those trapped on the other side are definitely there, a tragic reminder of a catastrophe long ago. The people on this side do not grow indifferent, but they started at some point to regard those on the other side as belonging to a different reality, no longer ours: they become a fiction. To offer a variation on

Shakespeare's Jaques in *As You Like it*, on the European map delineated by the Iron Curtain, not whole, but half the world's a stage.

### **Border State's Brave New Europe**

In *Border State*, the story's nameless narrator and protagonist writes his letters from Paris, a city which Benjamin famously dubbed the capital of the nineteenth century – one may add: the capital of Europe. Is Paris still the intellectual and literary capital of all of Europe after the end of communism? The Yugoslav born writer of Jewish-Montenegrin descent Danilo Kiš, who lived in Paris as of 1979, wrote in 1982 that 'Paris, in spite of everything, is still the capital of literature' (135). By 'in spite of everything', he was referring to the occasional arrogance of the intellectual *rive gauche*, turning a blind eye to the crimes and excesses of communism in favour of their own ideological preferences. To the narrator of *Border State*, the balance has been tipped, and Paris appears as 'just a little tourist village' (99). As a translator of French poetry into his own language (presumably Estonian, although this is never stated explicitly), he ended up in Paris in the first place 'to find sun' (4). He originates from an unnamed city "'up North," as they say here' (4). Salient about the geography of his realm of origin is that its only discernible border lies westward; toward the east, there is only forest: 'when a person senses death nearing, he gathers his last strength and drags himself into the woods [...]' (4). The year is 1993. His motive for going west? '[...] One morning I myself stepped into a tram and rode away, to leave that dying century, to commit my crime under the sun, to meet you [the imaginary addressee Angelo], and to give this testimony.' (7) Franz, his lover and victim, inhabits a precious small flat on the Île Saint-Louis in the heart of Paris; this scene of the crime is basically paid for by the salary Franz receives from the Council of Europe, marking the past heart of the continent as taken over and paid for by an ideology that, with the recent *bicentenaire* of the French Revolution, seems merely technocratic. The journey of someone from the East now becomes a story of disillusion, instead of the pilgrimage that it used to represent.

There seems to be something irreducibly different about the narrator – in the eyes of the others, people in Western-Europe. It is not just his passport ('a monster they [the French police] had never seen before, as if it might bite them or spray foul liquid on their uniform' 15), it is a physical border, a boundary that runs through the body. And even though Paris presents him with the opportunity to experience European culture in its original form (such as the much desired for original of the Gilles-painting by Watteau), 'And I didn't escape from anything either. Everything came with me-my life, Grandmother, the stuffy apartment of my childhood, whatever' (32). It is a portable, a mobile border, that travels with him wherever he goes; that he can never abandon or transgress. What makes the two spheres separated by this boundary so different?

First, there seems to be a different course of historical time in the two spheres. Linear progress and unification reign in the western sphere, backwardness and immobility in the east. Twentieth century history – war, trauma – is a resolved matter in Western-Europe, where EU-integration is about to complete the Enlightenment project. In the east, traumas remain traumas. There is, for instance, no one to listen to the stories of the narrator's grandmother, who spent time in the Gulag. At the same time, the narrator encounters no happy and enlightened people in Western-Europe. Instead, he encounters nihilism, existential panic after the demise of empire. Individualism in the west serves no other

purpose than to egoistically demand one's rights: 'All demanding their rights. People here are simply used to feeling that they have rights' (15). Capitalism turns out to be a religion of false idols: the idea for the crime rises when the narrator opens the fridge in Franz's apartment: his initial recognizing of yoghurt, salad, etc as sacred objects on an altar leads of course to deception. 'But at the same time I had this urgent desire to deface it all, to expose the chaos that lay beneath those surfaces, always on the brink of exposure [...]' (9–10).

The west has no vision for its future, and while it looks down on Eastern-Europe, it also envies the east for its 'real' histories and stories, craving a lost authenticity:

Franz once enthusiastically told me that I came from a country where history was being made on a daily basis. He claimed to envy me because nothing much was supposed to happen here, in these still waters, anymore. They've talked about a crisis for five years, but no one is supposed to know what that means or where this crisis is supposed to come from (75).

Moreover, the west secretly longs for the days of empire: 'What else is there for those who missed the Great Adventure: a bitter regret that they can no longer go native or elephant hunting, temple raiding, and settling villages ablaze' (19). And Franz has shares of a company involved in arms trade – a fact he justifies by the same relativistic logic that informs his philosophy courses (84). When the protagonist left his home country, he literally transgressed a time border: to have left Eastern-Europe is to have left 'that deserted century' (38).

Geographically, the east is characterized by vague borders, whereas in the western half regions that were historically contested have overcome their internal divides, and developed what one could call a heightened border-consciousness. Franz, with his Franco-German roots, embodies this. The Alsace, historically a contested border zone, runs through him, but he has processed its problematic history, integration has taken him and the whole of the west beyond such historical fissures.

All this creates almost unbearable tension for the narrator. He suggests that the true motive for his crime is 'to be a genuine and real East European, to finally betray the martyr-like trust that Franz had shown me' (19). In fact, the narrator suggests, Franz himself is to blame: 'he chose me, an East European, because who else would have listened as reverently to his rebellious tirades? Who here would have given a hoot about his philosophy, which was based on delights of deconstruction, or about any philosophy, for that matter?' (20). His motive is, then, disenchantment, disillusionment, the fact that this new-old border turns out unsurmountable, not because physical access is blocked but because the ultimate destiny of the journey is an illusion, a false object of desire (43). There is an uncanny echo of the march on Versailles of October 1789 when the narrator pays a tourist visit to the palace: two hundred years after the revolution, the murder of the king is repeated, this time it is the progressive west, product of its own Enlightenment imagination, assassinated by its self-created counterpart, Eastern-Europe.

### **Zones of free passage**

Even when a search for free zones of passage across the old-new, post-1989 border between Eastern- and Western-Europe seems doomed to fail, it makes sense to explore some themes in *Border State* which can be thought of as ways of free passage. The

novel presents a few, ranging from common utopian space, eroticism, and translation, to the notion of world literature. Finally, the form of the novel itself, a fictional epistolary exchange (albeit one-sided), will be looked into.

Still in the beginning of the novel, the protagonist describes a favourite landscape: 'a totally flat grass-covered seashore, empty as far as the eye can see' (11), containing a building 'perfectly white and cube-shaped, only one room with a window in each direction – north, south- east and west – so that day and night could move through it freely' (12). His wish is to become like grass, 'born from the most basic yearning for sun, ready for submissive death' (11); and when he concludes by writing to his addressee that this longing is connected to a 'list for mud and dirt', and that he wishes to 'taste whether your seed, Angelo, may be just as sweet as the grassy nectar' (12), the passage, which evokes Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, suggests eroticism as a level playfield, connecting the four cardinal directions. And just as the building seems void, lacking interior, so this playfield suggests non-being, non-identity: 'Angelo, I adore your nothingness. I'm sick to death and tired of all those people who are something' (29).

In day-to-day encounters, however, profound differences come to the fore. Having a drink with a certain Jean-Claude, the I pretends to be from Sweden, for 'when they hear you're from Eastern-Europe they look on you with pity and speak with hollow words, as if you were a dead relative' (45). The I goes along with the seduction game, only to reject the man 'with his pathetic eyes', who 'looked like a child whose toy had been pulled from his hands' (46). And with his partner and victim Franz, who has chosen 'an East-European, because who else would have listened as reverently to his rebellious tirades?' (20), sex is nothing but a power game. Even when nights occur when 'we were wild [...], as if in a fever' (61), they are effectively performing their Eastern, respectively Western-European part. Describing the squalor of his house of birth to his lover, the I writes: 'That seemed to excite him. I became a stinking primitive in his eyes, someone he had caught in the jungle and tamed' (72).

Likewise literary translation – the business of the narrator – is fraught with inequality from the outset. He refers mockingly to his own native tongue as 'that distant peasant vernacular that I'm translating the old men's poetry into' (14), whereas even a simple newspaper headline in French is described as 'elegantly cynical' (14). Learning French, once a means to 'read even more harmful books' (49), has resulted into what is now 'translating from one dead language into another', and 'books are nothing but empty gibberish' (49). Translation is, however, the ideology of European Strasbourg, where he meets Franz who chairs 'the seminar for East-European translators' (25), an encounter that makes the protagonist 'discover with amazement that a European, one of those flawless ghosts that hovered around me here, was nothing more than an ordinary, miserable, living human being' (25). Literature as such is dismissed as a means of genuine, authentic exchange; the old and honourable notion of world literature 'sounds just as hollow as "peace-keeping force."' Some kind of world literature may still exist in the brain of some well-intentioned literature professor in Eastern Europe' (88).

While translation and literature seem to have become worthless, we should take into account the unreliable status of the narrator, who is, after all, producing his own discourse. His letters may prove the contrary of what he professes: that it is in literature, to be precise in the epistolary novel, where Eastern and Western Europe can meet on a more equal basis, through a play of stereotypes and inversion, in which the implied author may be

shaking hands with the reader behind the narrator's back, to paraphrase Wayne Booth. One opening for such a reading is the narrator's assertion that he is writing to Angelo (whom the narrator at the very end confesses to be 'distant, even a pointless fantasy' 93) in French: 'Pardon my poor French by the way, I only dare to write to you because I know you too are not French' (2). Readers of the original text digest this ironical passage in Estonian; readers of a French translation are treated with a double irony: the French that they are reading is a translation of an Estonian working his Eastern European way into French. When I wrote earlier that the international readership of the novel significantly adds to the complexity of the implied audience of this fictional confession, then this issue seems most pressing when trying to understand the precise working of an epistolary novel that, in a rather dramatic way (after all, this is a murderer's confession), posits the existence of two fundamentally different spheres in Europe. Compare for instance Montesquieu's *Lettres Persanes*, which in spite of its intricacies of stereotype and 'a bewildering accumulation of levels "of reading the alien"' (Leerssen 140), still speaks from Europe about Europe, or rather from France about France, even when its fictional voices are self-proclaimed non-European.

If we temporarily set aside the fact that he is a concoction, Angelo is as much an outsider as the narrator. His origins are not stated, but the very first sentence of the novel posits the two as outsiders in Paris: 'What was it you said again? "You have a strange look in your eyes – like a bystander observing the world. You're not French, are you?"' (1). Frenchness is really Western-Europeanness, and its counterpart is Eastern-Europe. Does this irony work on the basis of a shared, implicit Europeanness, or rather, is there a genuine outsider perspective at work here, looking from a post-communist perspective at Western-Europeans, who have a fundamentally different view on European matters? *Border State*, I would argue, speaks to a European reading audience, but a divided one: it urges, for instance, to reflect about the language in which one consumes the story. In doing so, it holds up a mirror of a peculiar sort: it reflects distorted and conflicting images, thereby denying a mutual vantage point from which shared experiences (such as translator workshops sponsored by the Council of Europe) can be perceived. And who is holding up this mirror anyway? It seems that the author, when he professed in his essay in *Alter Ego* to write in the aftermath of the Cold War, with the ultimate revenge of the losers is to contaminate the winners' sense of reality, was right after all: there is no common ground, no shared European sense of reality – certainly not for a novel such as *Border State*.

### Regaining ground after the Iron Curtain

Churchill's speech was considered ancient by the time *Border State* appeared. Historians working on the Cold War nowadays tend to stress the many perforations of the metaphorical curtain, pointing out that the divide was not as absolute as early Cold War rhetoric implied (see for instance Villaume and Westad 2010). But discursive events have their own temporal logic. Even after the fall of the communist regimes, various kinds of divides continued to exist, and were constantly re-enacted in language, in discourse. When, for instance, president George Bush sr. declared that the Iron Curtain was 'rusting' and that 'shafts of light from the western side, our side, the free and prosperous side, are piercing the gloom of failure and despair on the other side' (quoted in Wright pp

51), the Iron Curtain was, in a way, re-installed, and with it a rather biased view of all of the historical events that make up the Cold War.

Conventional metaphors such as these are performative: they create a mental map through what they name in reality; this is how the geography of historical events is not just reconstructed (in the language used by historians) but also re-enacted (in the language used outside the academic writing of history, by novelists, script writers, politicians). Literature, fictional writing, tends to be modest about its voice in such political-geographical matters. Churchill's voice, of course, sounds much louder, still today.<sup>9</sup> When he set out to write, or rather to dictate, his six volumes of *The Second World War*, published from 1948 to 1953, he 'said that history would look on him favourably because he would write the history' (Catherwood pp 204); and the same source claims that 'Churchill is indisputably the hero of his own work, the man who knew.' His confidence in his control as author was recognized by the Swedish academy, which awarded him the Noble price for literature in 1953. Comparing him to 'Julius Caesar, Marcus Aurelius, and even Napoleon, whose letters to Josephine during the first Italian campaign certainly have passion and splendor', the academy stated: 'The analytical  *morbidezza*, without which the modern generation finds it hard to imagine an author, is foreign to him. He is a man for whom reality's block has not fallen apart. There, simply, lies the world with its roads and goals under the sun, the stars, and the banners. His prose is just as conscious of the goal and the glory as a runner in the stadium. His every word is half a deed'.<sup>10</sup> Churchill humbly decided not to question the Swedish Academy's verdict. His Nobel banquet speech, read by lady Churchill, as he could not attend himself, concluded that 'the judgment of the Swedish Academy is accepted as impartial, authoritative, and sincere throughout the civilized world'. And he continued to make a point about the individual voice losing ground in the tumultuous modern age:

Since Alfred Nobel died in 1896 we have entered an age of storm and tragedy. The power of man has grown in every sphere except over himself. Never in the field of action have events seemed so harshly to dwarf personalities [...] The fearful question confronts us: have our problems got beyond our control? Undoubtedly we are passing through a phase where this may be so. Well may we humble ourselves, and seek for guidance and mercy.<sup>11</sup>

If the adagium that Churchill's 'every word is half a deed' is true, then what is the effectiveness of a slim epistolary novel, published in Estonia in 1993, which, proliferated in translation into 19 languages<sup>12</sup>, encountered a European geography configured to a large extent by the kind of conventional metaphor launched by Churchill? Does it have enough voice to suggest a counter-geography? Leaving aside pessimistic analyses of the diminishing influence of literature, specifically in the post-communist world<sup>13</sup>, let us assume that this novel, for those who read it, does represent an attempt to write back. If so, the options laid out in the novel paint a bleak picture. Either one succumbs to being Eastern European, and to behave like one, under Western-European eyes, or one attempts to survive in an alternative geography, that of the borderland, the interstice:

I once saw the words 'border state' in a newspaper. That was how they labeled the country from which I came. It was a political term. Very appropriate, by the way. A border state is non-existent. There is something on one side and something on the other side of the border, but there is no border. There is a highway, and a field of grain with a farmhouse under tall, thirsty

trees, but where is the border between them? It's invisible. And if you should happen to stand on the border, then you too are invisible, from either side. (96-7)

No wonder that the narrator and protagonist hovers between two extremes: self-loathing and messianism, between the invisible, less-than-human Eastern European and a Prince Myshkin from Dostoyevski's *The Idiot* (tellingly, one of his last statements echoes Jesus at the cross: 'I thought to myself: it's finished' 99). These two attitudes are determined by the same power constellation, in which you only get to respond, never to speak or act first. Aggravating circumstance is the fact that also in Western-Europe, the single available motive for telling one's story seems the claim to victimhood: 'what would be sweeter than finding a victim, cornering him, and then bringing out one's little tale ... to lay on a counter life, one's wishes, dreams, crimes, and complexes, perhaps someone would be interested, for half price, for free!' (10). The beggar and the messiah merge here, in a language that seems profoundly ironical. Can one, then, only speak back in the form of a parody of the Christ figure, reincarnated amidst the logic of free market ideology?

There is suggestion in the text of a more profound sincerity, when the I reflects again about the status of his confession: 'This testimony of my life as a human being is coming to an end' (78). Elsewhere (Snel 2014) I have suggested that a rephrasing of Judith Butler's 'recognizable human' into 'recognizable European' is useful to understand the process by which for instance the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s were framed as non-European, as representing an otherness irreconcilable with the values professed by a Western-European half striving toward further integration. In the case of *Border State*, 'European' again seems to exclusively claim the notion of the human, relegating neighbours beyond its borders to a state that is not fully human. The narrator and protagonist, who 'would like to describe some views that were seen through a more or less forgotten window' (9), can only speak through a frame delineating our field of 'perceptible reality in which the notion of the recognizable human is formed and maintained over and against what cannot be named or regarded as the human' (Butler 64).

Such a reading of the novel goes against a more traditional reading of epistolary novels about cultural encounters, in which differences are admitted and explored, but there is always common ground in the act of writing as a level field of exchange (after all, one reads each other's letters, even admits to mutual misunderstanding). In such (mostly fictional) multilingual settings, one accepts the equality of the language of the other. But *Border State* situates the voice of the I in the outer rim, in the sphere of the not-yet human (or European) and the no-longer-human (or European). Describing a number of compatriots standing in front of a luxurious Parisian shop window, he recognizes himself:

You know, if you've ever stood in front of those windows, you may pretend that you're above it all, but you'll stay there forever. But it's too pathetic, too meaningless, to write about. One ought to write only about things that have at least a smidgen of literary quality, a trace of noble suffering, not about East Europeans dressed in jogging suits and running shoes, stopping in front of the opulent window displays in this city (68).

Paradoxically, echoing the image of 'a more or less forgotten window', this passage also points in the direction of a different reading of this all too rigid line of demarcation. Bearing in mind the above quoted fragment about the impossibility of a border state, a borderland, one can say that if the dividing line is unimaginable, if, spatially, the tipping point where one sphere ends and the other begins, is unthinkable, then so becomes difference

as such. As a consequence, the two sides have to acknowledge that the one cannot exist without the other – and in the novel the western half implicitly does so by admitting to the East being more authentic (when Franz expresses that he envies the I for its real stories, its real experiences. The inequality exists in the fact that the western sphere of Europe does not explicitly acknowledge its dependence on the other half. But it is only an audience, inhabiting its own reality, precisely because it can think of the people on the other side as a stage, as a fiction – and here we still see the configuration of Churchill’s metaphor at work. This interdependency explains the observation in the novel – also to be found in the earlier quoted essay from 2004, that ‘ten years ago, you could tell from the people’s appearances who was who – from the West or from the East [...] it is less and less difficult to see the difference’ (37).

This is not to deny the reality of the real, political geography:

Oh, well, I probably just invented this country, on the spot, just for fun. Nevertheless, it does exist on maps, just like other countries, that, if I may say so, have long ago become pointless and chimerical but still cling to their places on maps. Countries exist only on maps, just like money exists only in bank accounts (5)

But he continues: ‘People are ready to spill blood for their place on a map. Blood would be like a final seal, proof that everything is more than just an apparition’ (5). All in all, as much as the novel is aware (to the point of despair) of the power of political discourse, it also displays a strong consciousness of the creational power of representation, perhaps even of writing and painting and photography as the most real reality one can experience – precisely because all political discourse produces unreality: ‘Yes, I think those were your first words, Angelo, as you emerged from that vacuously bright sunshine, like an image appearing on white photographic paper when it’s immersed in developing solution’ (1). This is how Angelo is introduced; or this is, rather, how he appears, and even when he is a concoction, a fantasy, he is the addressee that makes this whole, one-sided epistolary exchange thinkable, and therefore real. So on the battlefield of language fiction may have a say after all, even or especially ‘East-European’ fiction. Too feeble perhaps to posit a counter-geography, all it can do is whisper, and haunt, like a ghost, or a stowaway.

## Notes

1. Jasmin Dizdar’s film *Beautiful People* (1999), a Bosnian-British coproduction, set in 1993, offers a variation on Karol Karol’s ‘escape’ in *Blanc*: a British hooligan gets drunk, falls asleep on a pallet with aid for Bosnia, and wakes up the next morning in war-torn Bosnia. In a fantastic and slightly moralistic turn, the selfishness and hedonism of the hooligan transforms into altruism – whereas Kiesłowski’s *Blanc* offers a tragicomic fantasy of revenge: by a twist of events, Karol Karol has his ex-wife locked up in a Polish prison, making her unattainably his. Another instance to be considered is Emir Kusturica’s *Underground*, where a structure of tunnels, originating in the communist age, underpins the continent.
2. Emil Tode is a pseudonym. The German (Hanser Verlag, 1997), Dutch (Meulenhoff 1996) and French (Gallimard, 1997) editions were published under this name. The US edition (Northwestern University Press, 2000) was published under the writer’s proper name, Tõnu Õnnepalu.
3. See for instance here for the official EU timeline of its own pedigree: [https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history/1990-1999\\_en](https://europa.eu/european-union/about-eu/history/1990-1999_en) [accessed on 5 February 2019]
4. Of course a case can be made that the East-West divide in Europe goes back to much earlier times, see for instance Larry Wolff’s *Inventing Eastern-Europe* (1994). This essay, however, is concerned with tracing the immediate discursive context of the Iron Curtain metaphor.

5. See for the full text of the speech for instance the website of the National Churchill Museum: <https://www.nationalchurchillmuseum.org/sinews-of-peace-history.html> [accessed on 5 February 2019]
6. Rose (2014) sums up, just as Wright (2007) does, various earlier usages of the metaphor, ranging from the Russian philosopher Rozanov in 1918, to Ethel Snowden in 1920. According to Rose, Churchill was asked in 1950 in 1951 'if he was familiar with any of these earlier usages [but he] replied, "No. I didn't hear of the phrase before – though everyone has heard of the iron curtain which descends in a theatre" (397).
7. Patrick Wright's *Iron Curtain. From Stage to Cold War* (2007) provides a meticulous cultural history of the phrase.
8. See for instance Costigliola, 406.
9. Undoubtedly related to Brexit is the recent surge of biopics of Churchill (such as *Darkest Hour*, Joe Wright, 2017, or *Churchill*, Jonathan Teplitzky, 2017) or Christopher Nolan's epic *Dunkirk* (2017), ending the ordeal of the Allies with Churchill's historical speech framing the massive exodus not as defeat but as the starting point of a future victory.
10. See for the full text: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1953/ceremony-speech/> [accessed on 5 February 2019]
11. See for the full text: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1953/churchill/speech/> [accessed on 5 February 2019]
12. See for an up-to-date list of available translations: (these translations are here: <https://sisu.ut.ee/ewod/oe/onnepalu/prose>)
13. See Wachtel 2006.

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