When the World Turned Upside-Down

When the World Turned Upside-Down: Cultural Representations of Post-1989 Eastern Europe

Edited by

Kathleen Starck

CAMBRIDGE SCHOLARS
PUBLISHING

When the World Turned Upside-Down: Cultural Representations of Post-1989 Eastern Europe,
Edited by Kathleen Starck

This book first published 2009

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

12 Back Chapman Street, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2XX, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-4438-0552-1, ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-0552-0

For Dad, border crosser between East and West

TABLE OF CONTENTS

POST EAST-WEST? AN INTRODUCTION

KATHLEEN STARCK

Imagine a room full of international scholars from both sides of the former iron curtain. They all work in a number of fields related to social and cultural disciplines. Now further imagine that these scholars are listening to a (West) German photographer's talk on his documentation of the inner-German border over a period of twenty years. The talk is more or less free of any comments indicating moral judgement. Instead, the focus lies on the intricate technicalities of the border constructions, which for themselves speak of the perversity and inhumanity of a state feeling the need to resort to such measures.

But then, it happens. A series of "before" and "after" photographs is presented. They show, for example, border constructions running through the middle of a village first and a new smooth road with no traces of the former division in the second image, or watchtowers and fences in an aerial photo of a forest, followed by a hardly discernable forest aisle, where nature has reclaimed what is hers. In one of these photographs there is also a border guard. The photo was taken during that in limbo time after the wall had come down, but before the reunification (November 1989 to October 1990). At this point, the photographer, after all, has a thing or two to say about morality.

He tells his audience how the boarder guard, who in these "new times" was unarmed, was being mocked by some youths riding their mopeds across the border because they knew it was about to be abolished. Taking this as a cue, the photographer further reports, he asked the guard whether in the past he would have shot the boys. He then quotes the guard's reply that he would have shot his own father if necessary and proceeds relating his, the photographer's, shock at such determined loyalty to a political system that had been exposed as inhumane and was about to cease to exist in the very near future. The photographer then comments how it is always possible to say "no" to orders and points to other infamous incidents in German history, where people did not "say no."

This then provokes a discussion, which under different circumstances might have become quite heated. Some East German scholars in the audience question the appropriateness of the comparison between GDR

border practices and the Third Reich. They further point out that many border guards were draftees forced into this particular service, stress the sanctions that were awaiting disobeying border guards and warn against generalisation.

Although everyone involved in the discussion stays calm and presents his or her points reasonably, it is evident that the debate is not merely about boarder guards, but, instead, about East German identity and how East Germans feel misrepresented by "the West." All this is translated back and forth from English to German, from German to English, to allow the rest of the international audience to follow the discussion. However, when the discussion is interrupted, the photographer thanked cordially, and the coffee break announced, the international visitors seem genuinely confused by what has just happened.

What had just happened was a discussion about very different interpretations of history, interpretations coming from two very close and yet very far sides of the former East-West divide. This episode, which took place at a conference on cultures of the Cold War, was furthermore about Eastern and Western socialisation and how it shapes views of events. Thus, it is a perfect example of how the "lifting of the iron curtain" did not necessarily entail a reconciliation of the different ways of life, which had developed on both sides of the division. It further illustrates the power of cultural representations (in this case the combination of the photograph and the photographer's comments) and that in their discussion it is crucial to consider who speaks and who is spoken for/of.

These seemingly antagonistic East-West differences are the result of a conflict of opposed ideologies–most commonly associated with the United States and the Soviet Union and their satellite states–in which a military struggle was diverted into a psychological one. Robert E. Denton Jr. even speaks of a "rhetorical construction of the political reality called cold war" (Denton Jr. 1991, xvii). He remembers that "[f]or most of us, it was a war of words, not bombs. It was a war of threats, name-calling, fear, and distrust" (Denton Jr. 1991, xiii).

Although this Cold War "hyperbole anti-Communism [and one might want to add "hyperbole anti-capitalism"] seems comically naïve today" (Kackmann 2005, Preface), its influence should not be underestimated. Both open propaganda and ideology disguised as popular culture had a strong effect. As Tony Shaw writes, it was impossible to escape the Cold War rhetoric because all areas of life were permeated by it:

> In a period of information and entertainment overload, stretching from the heyday of radio to the birth of satellite television, it was almost impossible not to be touched in some way by . . . Cold War publicity. Virtually

> everything, from the Olympics and opera to literature and space travel, assumed political significance. (Shaw 2006, 1)

So it comes as no surprise that the (official) view that both blocs had of each other was one of hostility, suspicion, and assumed superiority. Both sides believed to be in possession of the secret of "the right way to live" (Denton Jr. 1991, xiv), while many in the East, however, were at the same time longing for democracy and freedom and experiencing "consumer envy."[1]

If such beliefs are also always fostered by a lack of knowledge about the "other," the end of the Cold War and the collapse of so many Eastern European governments in the years of 1989 and 1990 provided new opportunities to gain more direct and unmediated access to and experience of the cultures of the other. Initially, this free contact was greeted with enthusiasm in East and West alike. Thus, the author of these lines still remembers very clearly the overwhelming images of East Germans dancing on the Berlin Wall and the excited comments of (Western) journalists, documenting the incredible event. Anthropologist Maruška Svašek cites the imaginative metaphors "enthusiastic Western journalists and involved scholars came up with . . . to describe the jubilant mood. Timothy Garton Ash (1990, 62), for example, called the opening of the Berlin Wall on 9 November 1989 'the greatest street-party in the history of the world'" (Svašek 2008, 9).

The revolutions and the ensuing opening of borders, besides creating new possibilities of getting to know the other side by travelling there, brought about the introduction of Western models of market economy and democracy to the former Eastern bloc. In addition, Eastern Europe has started to reside within the West in the form of thousands of immigrants from new member states of the European Union, such as the Czech Republic and Poland, but also from the former Soviet Union. Padraic Kenney has summed up these developments as not merely changing the former Eastern bloc, but also what he calls the Old Europe. What is more important in the light of this collection of essays, Kenney talks of a mutual shock for East and West in the post-communist era (Kenney 2006, 162).

So if

> throughout Central and Eastern Europe the transition away from state socialism and the party state towards democracy and market economies was generally welcomed as a necessary if uncertain rejection of forms of state power and economic practices that had shaped all aspects of life for over forty years, (Pickles and Unwin 2004, 9)

in the course of the transition, which was "harsh and cold" (van Hoven 2004, 1), some of the original enthusiasm changed to disillusion and nostalgia, sometimes even anger and outrage, or mistrust and fear on the side of the inhabitants of Central and Eastern Europe (cf. Svašek 2008, 11; 13; 14; 16). As C.M. Hann, Caroline Humphrey and Katherine Verdery have pointed out, "some of those who grumbled most in the old days now share the nostalgia of the less articulate, for an age when they had fewer and less secure rights in a legal sense, yet their needs were more adequately fulfilled than is the case a decade later" (2007, 10-11, see also van Hoven 2004 on post-socialist identities and relationships, 62-96).

These insights come from the subject of "post-socialism," "post-communism," or, as it is also often called, "transition," which has become an established area of academic research and has produced an abundance of writing within a vast number of social sciences. So before looking at cultural representations of Eastern Europe, it is necessary to consider what "transition" means to these countries in terms of political, economic, and ideological changes. As the experience was and still is a very different one throughout Eastern and Central Europe (cf. Kenney 2006, 9; Humphrey 2007, 12; Svašek 2008, 22; Pickles and Unwin, 10-11),[2] I shall concentrate on similarities that have been found in post-socialist studies to characterise the process of transition, which, interestingly, are often enough themselves Western accounts of Eastern Europe (cf. van Hoven 2004, 2; Hann 2007, 10). Characteristics found to be shared by post-communist countries are an assertion of independence and the rise of nationalism; a near absence of a culture of compromise (such as party pluralism); high expectations of leaders, a cynicism towards and/or mistrust of political institutions; a rejection of teleologism and grand theories; an ideological vacuum (partly filled by nationalism); a moral confusion (partly filled by religion; however, many citizens are unable to relate closely to religion); temporality, since post-communism is a transitional phenomenon; dynamism; instability; a wide-spread sense of insecurity; and legitimation problems (Holmes 1997, 6-21). Richard Rose even talks of "'creative destruction' that occurs when one regime abruptly replaces another or an economy is transformed" (Rose 2009, 20). Regarding the "vacuum" that opened up, he writes: "Transformation voided the institutions of uncivil society but could not provide civil institutions overnight" (Rose 2009, 26). Thus, it is not possible to predict the results of transition. When the transition started happening, theorists were not equipped to predict its outcome. Their knowledge of neo-classical economic systems did not provide any answers as to how economies in transformation are working (Rose 2009, 1).

As a result, uncertainty is introduced not merely as a factor for Eastern Europeans themselves, but for Western Europeans likewise.

Moreover, what distinguishes Eastern and Central European from other transitional countries is their unique sharing of a *simultaneousness of a number of transitional processes*. Leslie Holmes describes this as follows:

> [these countries are characterised by a] *simultaneous* and very rapid transition *from* a centralized and state-run and largely nationalized economy, a highly centralized and relatively closed polity, a society largely devoid of a bourgeoisie, and from large-standing military and trading blocs, *towards* a marketized and privatised economy *and* pluralist democracy *and* a society with a powerful capitalist class *and* to new military allegiances and trading blocs. The intended comprehensiveness and pace of change distinguishes the post-communist from other transitional [countries]. (Holmes 1997, 19, original emphasis)

Rose confirms this:

> While every society is in transition, few have experienced transformation as abruptly and pervasively as the nations once in the Communist bloc . . . . In the case of the Communist bloc, it was more than a political revolution. There was the treble transformation of the economy, society and the political regime–and often of the boundaries of the state as well. (Rose 2009, 1)

Holmes draws attention to the uniqueness of these processes when she writes that they "are unprecedented in their range and ambitions" (Holmes 1997, 329). The state of transition is further emphasised by the fact that terms such as "former communist," "former Soviet," "former Yugoslav," etc. are still in common usage. According to Siban Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska and Elena Gapova,

> the West still relies on its perceived or imagined distinction from the East–which does the same in turn, having internalized its inferiority and still lacking a new vocabulary to inscribe its new identity . . . . The terms . . . reflect a certain time lag inherent in their identities–as for the "former" this and that, they appear permanently marked by their past, at best struggling to create a new image and fully enter the post-Cold War world. (Forrester et al. 2004, 17)

This focus on Eastern Europe as in a state of "becoming," as being in a process, is likewise shared by Natasa Kovacevic when she refers to "the reification of Eastern Europe as a civilizing object (*task*) by the European Union and North America" (Kovacevic 2008, 1, original emphasis).

Bettina van Hoven, on the other hand, in line with her objective of "giving voice to the people living through transition" (2004, 2), defines transition in terms of its impact on people's identities: "For many people transition has meant that all their prior ideologies and beliefs were shattered through the introduction of a new social, economic and political framework" (van Hoven 2004, 59). She further points out that, while for many this resulted in economic hardship, there are also "winners" of the transition:

> In many countries cities have begun to flourish as a result of wide-ranging renovations and investment opportunities for new (foreign) businesses. Here, places indicating hopes for a better future were developed. People have been able to explore new opportunities and gain new freedoms. People have explored new kinds of work, new interests, travelled abroad and connected with new cultures. (van Hoven 2004, 60)

Considering the new and often critical perception of the West and Western social models and practices by Eastern Europeans, the question arises if and in what way have Western perceptions of the East changed and how twenty years after the Cold War ended this manifests itself in cultural representations of Eastern Europe and Eastern Europeans. Are they still considered post-socialist? How much does the West know, or want to know, about the East? Social anthropologist Mihał Buchowski, in reference to Bob Dylan, offers the following view:

> "How many roads must the post-socialist countries go down, before you call them non post-communist?" Captured into discourse of "escaping socialism," "joining Europe," "building democracy," and "establishing free markets," people both in the West and the former Soviet bloc perceive the region, stretching roughly in the triangle among the Baltic, Black and Adriatic Seas, as the "land in transition." It is still a kind of mysterious Bermuda Triangle for many in the west. (Buchowski 2001, 9)

According to Boris Fishman, Western perceptions of Eastern Europe equally provide insights into the self-definition of the West. In his collection of fictional and non-fictional writing on Eastern Europe, *Wild East: Stories From the Last Frontier*, he comes to the conclusion that,

> most of the Western protagonists in their [the authors included in *Wild East*] work are the antagonist kind, which is to say they are oblivious, self-absorbed and presumptuous about the lands they have come to visit . . . . Flawed as their perceptions were, they were called by a genuine curiosity, by the idea that Eastern Europe, victim of one upheaval after another

> throughout the twentieth century, held out insights that life at home, largely sheltered from catastrophe by geography and the can-do ethic of democratic capitalism, did not. (Fishman 2004, xiii-xiv)

In a way, this is not surprising as Eastern and Western histories are intertwined in many ways and fictitious and real life Westerners seek "Eastern encounters" in order to find answers to their own questions of identity. David A. Kideckel concludes that, "the post-socialist transformation in Eastern Europe is ultimately as much about the West as it is about the East" (Kideckel 1994, 135).

Defining the "Western Self" through and in contrast to the "Eastern Other" is a strategy that is likewise pointed out by many of the contributors of this collection of essays. Thus, a concept well known from the area of postcolonial studies has found its way into representations of Eastern Europe. This is a relationship, which has been identified by a number of scholars, most notably in Natasa Kovacevic's recent book *Post/Communism. Colonial Discourse and Europe's Borderline Civilization*. In a similar vein, Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska, and Elena Gapova explain their collection of essays on post-communist cultures, *Over the Wall/After the Fall*, to have been inspired by African-American studies (Forrester et al. 2004, 30).

Moreover, Kideckel draws attention to a phenomenon, which is likewise familiar from postcolonial theory. He explains in his essay "Us and Them" that during the beginning of the transition,

> the West [was] often evoked as the model to which these societies ought to aspire. The idea that Eastern European society should ultimately approximate a Western model ha[d], in fact, been elevated to unquestioned dogma by many both in the West and East. (Kideckel 1994, 134)

In connection with ideas from postcolonial discourse surfaces the question of memory and power. Who decides what is remembered? In quite a number of the essays in this collection, it seems there is a Western hegemony of memory.

The book starts, however, with three essays, which foreground the experience of transference, temporality and identities in transit. John Sears looks at Hungarian/British George Szirtes's poetic account of his 1989 experiences in Hungary. Sears describes how Szirtes, being in the privileged position of an outsider living in the West, reflects on the "linkage, transference, and transmission between self and other, English and Hungarian, present and past, West and East . . ." and points to Szirtes' provisional and tentative approach, which mirrors the disorientation and

uncertainty he witnesses. Corina Crisu analyses Bosnian/American Aleksandar Hemon's narration of the fictitious journey of a Bosnian character to the United States. Crisu's focus lies on concepts such as fragmentation, uncertainty, displacement, transnational identities and, ultimately, the need to reinvent one's own identity in order to survive. Moreover, she depicts the reciprocal relationship between East and West in Hemon's novel, i.e. the Westernness of Eastern Europe and the Easternness of Western Europe. In a similar way, Maria-Ana Tupan examines unstable identities in Malcolm Bradbury's novel *Doctor Criminale*. She points to Bradbury's depiction of Bulgaria's loss of a cultural identity, the erasure of memory, the emergence of a cultural void, dehistoricised personalities, and historical dislocation. As in the previous essays, she likewise demonstrates the way the West tries to define itself and its own culture through encounters with the East.

This point becomes central to the essays in the second chapter. Elmar Schenkel explores how Western travel writers encounter their own past in their search for religious groups, which were revived after the collapse of the Soviet Union, whereas Cinzia Mozzato looks at the way British post-1989 poetry is influenced by Eastern European writers and how Western poets use the former bloc countries to understand incidents in British history, such as the bombing of Dresden during the Second World War.

The third chapter revolves around the question of who defines what is remembered and how to tell the history of East Germany. Steven Quinn questions the way the GDR and its inhabitants are mainly remembered through the *Stasi* (secret police) and how the voices of "the people" are suppressed by looking at Anna Funder's non-fictional book *Stasiland* and the American translation of East German Jana Hensel's biographical account of life in the GDR. Correspondingly, Antje Budde asks why a documentary about East German Punks, although filmed by East German women, presents a West German and male perspective.

Finally, the fourth chapter deals with the notion of Eastern Europe as the Other. Geoff Willcocks explores how the war in Yugoslavia is portrayed in British theatre and comes to the conclusion that the othering of the Balkans is a welcome device for making Yugoslavian news more palatable for Western audiences, relieving them of the moral dilemma they might experience when witnessing the war. Josep Armengol-Carrera, on the other hand, applies postcolonial ideas to Arthur Phillip's novel *Prague* and reveals how Western characters display colonial attitudes towards the East, which is treated as a new frontier.

Ultimately, this collection of essays is an attempt to discover whether Western writers of fiction and poetry, filmmakers, journalists, and

playwrights are indeed presenting Eastern Europe as Buchowski's "mysterious Bermuda Triangle" and what depictions of this formerly unknown territory might reveal about the West's attitude towards the East. Although a multitude of cultural products dealing with post-socialist phenomena have emerged over the last decade or so, literary and cultural criticism have so far generated little on the subject.[3] Thus, this book might be a small contribution towards a change of this situation and will, hopefully, initiate further dialogue between East and West.

Notes

1. David A Kideckel even talks of a "sense of failure, inferiority, and shame in the East-Central European mindset" due to the constant presence of the Western way of life as a frame of reference. (Kideckel 1994, 135)

2. In fact, some scholars have started questioning the category "post-socialist." See Caroline Humphrey's "Does the Category 'Postsocialist' Still Make Sense?".

3. What should be mentioned at this point are Lynn Guyver's 2001 book *Post Cold War Moral Geography: a Critical Analysis of Representations of Eastern Europe in Post 1989 British Fiction and Drama*, Christoph Houswitschka's 2005 *Literary Views on Post-wall Europe: Essays in Honour of Uwe Böker*, as well as Katharina Gerstenberger's 2008 *Writing the New Berlin: The German Capital in Post-Wall Literature*. Moreover, a growing interest in post-communist cultural studies is evident in publications such as *Over the Wall/After the Fall. Post-Communist Cultures through an East West Gaze*, edited by Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska, and Elena Gapova in 2004.

References

Ash, Timothy Garton. 1990. *We the People. The Revolution of 89 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague*. London: Granta Books.

Buchowski, Mihał. 2001. *Transformation. An Anthropological Perspective on Postsocialism*. Poznan: Wydawnictwo Humaniora.

Denton Jr., Robert E. 1991. Preface to *The Cold War as Rhetoric*. Eds. Lynn Boyd Hinds and Theodore Otto Wind, iii-xviii. N.Y.: Praeger.

Fishman, Boris. 2003. Introduction to *Wild East: Stories From the Last Frontier*. Ed. Boris Fishman, xi-xvii. London: Random House.

Forrester, Sibelan Forrester, Magdalena J. Zaborowska, and Elena Gapova, eds. 2004. *Over the Wall/After the Fall. Post-Communist Cultures through an East West Gaze*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Gerstenberger, Katharina. 2008. *Writing the New Berlin: The German Capital in Post-Wall Literature*. N.Y.: Camden House Inc.

Guyver, Lynn. 2001. *Post Cold War Moral Geography: a Critical Analysis of Representations of Eastern Europe in Post 1989 British Fiction and Drama*. Warwick: University of Warwick Press.

Hann, C.M., ed. 2007. *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*. London: Routledge.

Holmes, Leslie. 1997. *Post-Communism. An Introduction*. Cambridge: Polity.

Houswitschka, Christoph, ed. 2005. *Literary Views on Post-Wall Europe. Essays in Honour of Uwe Böker*. Trier: WVT.

Humphrey, Caroline. 2007. Does the Category "Postsocialist" Still Make Sense? In *Postsocialism. Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*. Ed. C.M. Hann, 12-15. London: Routlege.

Kackmann, Michael. 2005. *Citizen Spy: Television, Espionage and Cold War Culture*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press.

Kenney, Padraic. 2006. *The Burdens of Freedom. Eastern Europe Since 1989*. London: Zed Books.

Kideckel, David A. 1994. Us and Them. In *Cultural Dilemmas of Post-Communist Societies*. Eds. Aldona Jawlowska and Marian Kempny, 134-144. Warsaw: IFis.

Kovacevic, Natasa. 2008. *Narrating Post/Communism*. London: Routledge.

Pickles, Tim and John Unwin. 2004. Transition in Context: Theory in Post-Socialist Transformations. In *Europe. Lives in Transition*, Ed. Bettina Van Hoven, 9-28. Edinburgh : Pearson.

Rose, Richard. 2009. *Understanding Post-Communist Transformation*. A Bottom Up Approach. London: Routledge.

Shaw, Tony. 2006. *British Cinema and the Cold War*. London: I.B.Tauris.

Svašek, Maruška. 2008. Introduction : Postsocialism and the Politics of Emotions. In *Postsocialism. Politics and Emotions in Central and Eastern Europe*. Ed. Maruška Svašek, 1-33. N.Y.: Berghahn Books.

Van Hoven, Bettina. 2004. Introduction. In *Europe. Lives in Transition*. Ed. Bettina Van Hoven, 1-8. Edinburgh: Pearson.

—. 2004. Identities. In *Europe. Lives in Transition*. Ed. Bettina Van Hoven, 57-79. Edinburgh: Pearson.

—. 2004. Relationships. In *Europe. Lives in Transition*. Ed. Bettina Van Hoven, 79-98. Edinburgh: Pearson.

Transference, Temporality, and Identities in Transit

DIMENSIONS OF THE PRESENT MOMENT: GEORGE SZIRTES'S *BRIDGE PASSAGES* AND THE HUNGARIAN EXPERIENCE OF 1989

JOHN SEARS

A poem by the Hungarian poet Sándor Weöres, "Magyarok," translated by Edwin Morgan as "Hungarians," imagines the "thousand years" that comprise the mythic and real history of the Magyars: "all passed in my dream," culminating in a vision of "Budapest woven of bridges." Death appears, finally, with a face "clouded by hammer and sickle of froth and foam" (a nightmare vision of repressive history), to lead the narrator and his "little group," metonymic of the nation, across the Styx (the Danube). The poem concludes with the beginning of the journey of death; "A lerombolt híd tövén a kompot sötétben értük el"—in Morgan's translation, "We reached the ferry at the end of the broken bridge in the dark" (Turczi 2005, unpaginated).

Weöres' poem is reprinted as 1988's entry in a recent anthology of twenty-five Hungarian poems spanning the years 1978-2002, titled, after this concluding line, "At the End of the Broken Bridge." Weöres died in 1989, just before the lifting of Communism and the collapse of the Berlin Wall. George Szirtes elegises him in "In Memoriam Sándor Weöres" as "the conjuror" who

> could take
> a parasol and out of it create
> an ecosystem, or beneath
> the parasol, meander in the wake
> of *realpolitik* and contemplate
> its dreadful colonnade of teeth.
> (Szirtes 1991a, 58, original emphasis)

The "parasol" alludes to Weöres' major long poem "The Red Parasol," translated and reprinted in Szirtes and George Gömöri's anthology of modern Hungarian poetry *The Colonnade of Teeth* (1996), another title borrowed from Weöres.

Szirtes's elegy appears towards the end of his 1991 collection *Bridge Passages*, a book that, in its responses to the events in Hungary in 1989, also "meander[s] in the wake / of *realpolitik*" (original emphasis). The lyrics in *Bridge Passages* address the transitions and transformations of 1989 tangentially, through apposite clichés like "Drawing the Curtain" and through natural metaphors of historical agency like the "storm" in the same poem. Language, the collection implies, may be too abrupt in its assessment of the new reality; to the descriptive and declarative assertions available to poetry, caveats need to be added that allow alternative responses to reside within the words used. When "Drawing the Curtain" invokes "the storm / that lays the human pattern waste" (Szirtes 1991a, 3), the metaphorical force is tangible, but "the human pattern" remains indeterminate—patterns of oppression or of survival? A pattern detected or imposed? A pattern of creativity or of destruction?

The prevailing metaphor in this poem derives, like that of much of the collection, from architecture, with "the convolutions of this frieze" offering a product of "the human pattern" that symbolises its immersion in history, like the "rooms that live within / and yet without the history" in "The Comfort of Rooms" (Szirtes 1991a, 10). The "sensuous and tangible" reality of buildings is reassuringly solid and present; each end-stopped stanza of "Drawing the Curtain" (enclosed rooms, where "stanza" returns momentarily to its literal meaning of "stopping-place") relates its own evasion of the import of architecture's friability, itself a metaphor for the "flickering / inconsequentiality / of every human movement" (Szirtes 1991a, 3). Comprising an isolated line, "inconsequentiality" here begs a series of questions about agency, human self-determination and action. The poem seems to imply inertia (those end-stopped stanzas making it repeatedly judder to a halt); but agency resides in "history," who "packs her bags and pays the bill / long owing," offering up the raw details of the city as "her discarded materials." The conception of history indebted to a new economy and a new liberty is also another kind of movement, "a moral fall" or "a moving curtain" in which "everything uncertain / hurts and gathers in the folds" (Szirtes 1991a, 4).

Etymologies of the words of the collection's title shed light on their significances across *Bridge Passages*. The noun "bridge," from the Old Frisian *brigge* and Old Norse *bryggja*, signifies "A structure forming or carrying a road over a river or ravine, etc., or affording passage between two points at a height above the ground" (*Shorter OED*, third edition 1975 reprint); other nautical, musical, technical and physiognomical meanings are also listed. The verb "[t]o bridge" is also "[t]o make a bridge over; to span with a means of passage." "Passage," from French *passer*, to pass,

offers a range of meanings concerned with movement: the passing of people "onward, across or past;" the migratory flight of birds; passing from life to death; a journey or voyage. It also refers to that which is passed along—"a way, road, path, route, channel;" "a crossing, ford, ferry or bridge." Then there are meanings, which assume significant connotations in Szirtes's uses of the word, to do with transactions and "negotiations between two persons," and a "passage" as "a portion of a composition" (as in E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*); and, finally, a series of more tangential meanings to do with horse riding.

"Bridges" therefore constitute or facilitate "passage," while "passages" can be a kind of "bridge;" the two terms interlink or mirror each other in their meanings, constituting translations of each other, so that, for example, the "passage" of "a portion of composition" can become, within this etymology, a figure of the way writing can bridge the gap between writer and reader, or translate historical experience into aesthetic form, or the way specific poems act as "bridges" between the different sections into which the book is organised. Bridging and passages together constitute a double movement, a linkage that effects a transference or transmission between self and other, English and Hungarian, present and past, and West and East—indeed, the possibilities of translation of language and experience constitute a major concern of the poems in *Bridge Passages*. Writing, as a form of passage, contributes to the architecture implied by the bridge; each is a constructed link between things, an attempt to join things together in order to make "sense" out of them.

Bridge Passages fully exploits these etymological dimensions, and the translations, derivations and linguistic movements that they mark. Szirtes registers the importance of the Budapest bridges as cross-city passages while reporting on his involvement in the protest marches of June 1989: "Then across the bridge to the last two stations . . . We set off across the bridge towards the palace" (Szirtes 1989, 14). The six *Bridge Passages* sections of the collection correspond to the six bridges that, in 1989, traversed the Danube in Budapest—a seventh, the Lágymányosi Bridge, was added in 1995. These sequences work as a central and linking group of poems that, together, affords passage through the collection and between the other sections. They also, collectively, stand for Hungary itself at the particular historical moment addressed in the collection. Szirtes commented, in a radio broadcast in November 1989, on Hungary's emergent position in relation to East and West: "As Austria and Hungary edge closer and Hungary strains to become the international bridge between East and West the concept of President Gorbachev's 'common European house' gains ever greater importance."[1]

Bridge Passages begins where Weöres' "Hungarians" ends, in a present moment, at the end of the bridge in the dark, with a poem called "Night Ferry." "Night Ferry" addresses the navigation of history as an experience of disturbed, disturbing motion, "A deep slow swell" as "[t]he vessel rolls." Seasickness, "the idea of sea," permeates the poem's lexis (and punctuates the collection as a contrastive locus differentiating land-locked Hungary from Szirtes's adopted England; later in the collection, in Hungary, Szirtes writes a poem called "Nachtmusik:" "miles away / from any sea"). It establishes reluctant movement and physical discomfort as the initial conditions to which *Bridge Passages* responds. Importantly, the poem begins with the word "And:" "And our idea of hell is the night ferry," conjoining itself to the narrative and final line of Weöres' poem. The opening *in medias res* conjunction immediately asserts *Bridge Passage*'s concern with the linkages afforded by history and poetic translation, just as the poem itself initiates the themes of the bridging of gaps and the interlinking of geographies, languages and histories. The night ferry connects the world preceding the present to that of the present moment and the future, but also establishes that future as potentially infernal, connoting the ferry of Greek myth, which transports the dead across the Lethe to Hades. Szirtes's ferry, "our idea of hell," also transports its passengers from an indeterminate origin—the past—towards an uncertain future.

At a deeper level, "Night Ferry" (its title also evoking Derek Mahon's first collection *Night Crossing* (1968) and the "sleepless night-crossing" in his "The Prisoner") enacts the transition or passage from a residual, symbolic history of "pain" and "nightmare" from which the poem, and, by extension, the collection as a whole, struggles to awaken. The movement of the night ferry traverses the "deep slow swell" of the unconscious of history, which, in its revolutionary and unknowable forms, will constitute the chronotope across which the poems of *Bridge Passages* move. The past persists as "emptiness," "meaning nothing," and the poem's express concern is to record, however briefly and indirectly, the "pain that art cannot refine," to alarm and inform in the face of poetry's own seeming ineffectuality (Szirtes 1991a, 1). "Hungarians," Szirtes and Gömöri contest in their "Introduction" to *The Colonnade of Teeth*, "have tended to cling to the belief that poetry can change social life" (Szirtes and Gömöri 1996, 16). *Bridge Passages* explores the possibility of sustaining this belief in post-Communist Hungary, focussing its attention on 1989 and its immediate aftermath. Its provisional, tentative approach—characterised by poetry of dense formal consistency, comprised largely of sequences of four-, six- and eight-line end-stopped stanzas that resemble, in their

fragmented totality, a shattered sonnet sequence or a dismantled, once monolithic regime—responds to the difficulty of addressing in poetry the events of what is described, in a "Rondeau" late in the collection, as "a furious year" (Szirtes 1991a, 60).

The negative, Lethean resonances of "Night Ferry" introduce thematic tensions between memory and forgetfulness, offering in "the bottom line of nightmare" an implicitly modernist, Joycean vision of a history lying beyond aesthetic redemption, in a space that, in a further Joycean echo, "art cannot refine." The Joycean artist, "refined out of existence" (Joyce 1966, 215), is also the artwork itself in its failure to refine, to "make good again" in some way the "nightmare" experience of history. The poem offers a painful, sluggish transition tainted by a hangover—"a thumping head no aspirin can soothe" suggesting the aesthetic feeling of painful wakefulness, rather than the anaesthetic unfeeling of sleep or the "soothing" aspirin, as a compulsory option in the face of history's demands. The hangover signifies the trace of the past in the present, a persistence that enacts another kind of connectedness, the ineradicable past symbolically exerting its baleful influence over the present, persisting in the present as a painful disorder of the body politic.

"Night Ferry," its three quatrains like a gate barring entrance to *Bridge Passages*, both invites and resists movement. It establishes a mood of fraught anxiety of subject and language that it calls, for the moment, "normal," and which the rest of the collection both resists and explores, through "the continual nightmare / of the wall" (the constraining walls of domestic horror, as well as the Berlin Wall) in "A Game of Statues" (Szirtes 1991a, 42), and the "idea so macabre it cannot picture / its own desperation" in "Smog" (Szirtes 1991a, 17), right up to the concluding translations of Ágnes Nemes Nagy's *Diary*, where the second entry reiterates the "Nightmare" of the opening poem. Here, at the end of *Bridge Passages,* the "nightmare" becomes pure Gothic melodrama, an epigrammatic howl of stock images of horror and mortality—"the corpse," "the softening skull," "the naked row of teeth" (another "colonnade")—depicting the historical realities the collection has negotiated as "a world of rotting rags and clout" on which "the marsh-light of cold reason" shines (Szirtes 1991a, 62). Nagy, a founding editor (along with Weöres, Janos Pilinszky and others) of *Ujhold* ("New Moon"), a major Western-facing literary magazine, was "silenced" by the Communists—"she found work as a schoolteacher," Szirtes notes in the "Introduction" to his translations of her poetry, *The Night of Akhenaton* (Nagy 2004, 10). Szirtes's translations of her work in *Bridge Passages* assert an ironic link between his own work and the silenced poets of her generation. Prohibited from

producing poetry, she instead wrote children's books and (like Szirtes) translated foreign poets. *Bridge Passages* seems sometimes burdened by its author's awareness that the freedoms and choices he has by historical circumstance been able to take for granted have been denied those of whom he writes; choosing to conclude the collection with his translations of Nagy's work offers something of what Seamus Heaney calls "redress," the "redress" which is also, for Nagy, "Revenge" (Szirtes 1991a, 62).

"Choice" is a concept that troubles *Bridge Passages*; an essential element of the ideological shift from Communism to free market economics, "choice" and the "freedoms" associated with it undergo intense scrutiny as ethical and aesthetic problems. "Choice" is closely linked to agency and action:

> To act, to make things happen, to make choices
> are all conditions of the beautiful
> and the exact,

asserts "Nachtmusik" (Szirtes 1991a, 27)—"exact" bears the adjectival weight of aesthetic precision but also the verbal implication of the demand and enforcement of payment, history's "bill / long owing" (Szirtes 1991a, 3). The framing of "choice" in relation to aesthetics is a move that "The Flies" extends further to geographical and historical situations: "Being here is an aesthetic choice / for those who have it" (Szirtes 1991a, 7). For others, of course, there is no choice at all; some, the poem suggests, with a nod to its author's choice, are more equal than others in the new democratic world. The poem continues: "We give the wall a voice. The cut worm forgives the plough." Here "choice" rhymes with "voice," establishing connections between aesthetic choices, liberal values of democratic representation, and introducing echoes of Blakean democratic radicalism. Blake's sixth *Proverb of Hell* is appropriate to the "infernal" world of immediately post-1989 Budapest, in its invocation of human destruction and natural forgiveness (Blake 1972, 150-2). "The Flies" (another Blakean echo) imagines the coming of capitalism shrouded in the "stink" of individualism, each "fly" "groping" towards his "personal heap." At the same time, other flies for whom "the time is wrong" die in the new spring; the "spring," in turn, heralds

> the cold wind
> brewing beyond the Buda hills, the frost
> making a belated entrance. (Szirtes 1991a, 8)

Whether the post-1989 thaw is real or not is already an issue; in "A Sea Change,"

> things are done
> precisely as before but feel
> a little different,

while someone showers "Behind the frosted glass" (Szirtes 1991a, 13-4).

The "frosty" dawn of capitalist freedoms is, in *Bridge Passages*, an ambivalent transformation, constructing "a conjectural landscape" described, in "Nachtmusik," by the German word *Heimat* (Szirtes 1991a, 27), possibly alluding to Ottó Orbán's poem for Sándor Weöres, "Sinking Orpheus," in which (in Szirtes's own translation) the "dying poet" "writes in the dust with his blood the word: *[H]eimat*." *Heimat*, post "Waste Land," resonates with Wagnerian and Eliotesque longing: "Nachtmusik" refers to "The lull / of belonging," the pause at the line's end imitating this "lulling," before we return to the infinitive "to act" and the transitive "to make choices." The "lull" hesitates before asserting its own choice: music tells us that "though we die / we nevertheless belong," the poem claims, with another caveat: "It doesn't tell us where, that is the catch." We're left with "something without form," not art or music or poetry but "The empty noise / of radio waves," a disorientating dislocation that recurs throughout the collection (Szirtes 1991a, 28). "You could be anywhere," the next poem, "Bridge Passage," begins (Szirtes 1991a, 29), repeating a line from the earlier "A Domestic Faust:" "You could be anywhere. Indeed you are . . . " (Szirtes 1991a, 5). In "Bodies" we're told that "it is hard to know just where to place a thing" (Szirtes 1991a, 35); "The Comfort of Rooms" worries that "the layers of vision shift in alarming parallax" (Szirtes 1991a, 10). The transitional experience of "Night Ferry" imbues the subsequent poems with this sense of disorientated unreality, of perceptual confusion, a mood corresponding to the giddy uncertainties of the events of 1989. The "furious" year constitutes a historical moment that, to Szirtes's poems, is also present in all its confusing, sometimes bewildering new dimensions; within the anger and energy implicit in "furious" lies also (in "In a Strong Light") the tranquillity of a compromised pastoral vision, "the everyday news / of bridges, trees and grass" (Szirtes 1991a, 16).

Szirtes's problematic pastoral forms, their reliance (in poems like "Wild Garden") on new configurations of the "cold pastoral" of his earlier works, offer the "bridge" and the "passage"—words so etymologically interlinked as to be near-synonyms, and carrying architectural, musical, literary and other meanings—as allegories of multiple interconnections in the ways the words ramify through the collection.

"A Woman with a Rug" offers "unlit passages / of dialogue;" "somewhere there's a bridge / between the actor and his ghosts," opines "Funeral oration," the "bridge" here spanning the space between stanzas (Szirtes 1991a, 52); in "Chinese White" "An image hangs and drops / in a grey passageway or alley" (Szirtes 1991a, 51); "Bridge Passage" meditates on "passing time, and time too passing on / to things a passage can adjust" (Szirtes 1991a, 29). The "bridge" and the "passage" are in one sense symptoms of the author's "pretty desperate attempt . . . to discover bridges between my life in England and my history in Hungary" (Szirtes 2000, 14). Nevertheless they transcend this biographical confine to express also the moment and movement—the momentum—which the collection perceives as its responsibility, to which it fastidiously responds, with the "Responsibility / to every piece of unforgiving matter" of "A Domestic Faust" (Szirtes 1991a, 6). Their reiteration, punctuating and emphasising the collection's rhythm, adds to the poetry's formalism, its metrical consistency.

Miroslav Holub's essay "The Dimension of the Present Moment," to which I've been alluding, is informative in this context. The "present moment" in *Bridge Passages* is the immediately historical "now" of the events of 1989 to which the poems respond, the Ted Hughes-like "now and now and again now" of "A Sea Change:"

> Even now, something begins . . . These things are done
> precisely as before but feel
> a little different now . . . Now's the time perhaps
> for understanding what remains the same.
> (Szirtes 1991a, 13)

It's the "now" of immediate events present too in Szirtes's prevailing use of the present continuous, as in "the band is gaily signalling" in "A Woman with a Rug." Holub, considering the limits of human perception in relation to the experience of the immediate "now" (limits with which Szirtes's poems also grapple), writes that "every musical composition, especially of classic or romantic tradition, has its basic tempo, which the musician either keeps or breaks. This tempo should be in some relation to the dimension of the present moment" (Holub 1990, 3). The "tempo" of *Bridge Passages*, the rhythmic order and pace underpinning its concerns with surface variations, is perceptible in its tendency towards metrical consistency, its predominantly four- or five-stress lines. Keeping or breaking with such a demand is rather an ideological choice aligning the poems in *Bridge Passages* with formal traditions rather than with the potential, unformed freedoms implicit in revolutionary contexts, a choice

elaborated and adhered to in the collection's concern with "redress" and reparation (paying the debts of history) and with playing "the language games" of "A Domestic Faust" (Szirtes 1991a, 5) or redressing "the foreignness of languages" and the "losing" of "meaning" in "English Words" (Szirtes 1991a, 33). In "Rain," this linguistic frailty becomes palpable:

> You can't pronounce the words, nor can you shout
> for lack of vowels. The language starts to ache
> and slowly crumbles.
> (Szirtes 1991a, 50; italics original)

The dimension of the present moment, Holub's scientific allegory of endurance and suffering, is translated in Szirtes's poetry into a possession of the Hungarians who populate it, but not of the poet himself: "A Woman with a Rug" addresses, as does all of *Bridge Passages*, "The tragic dimension which is rightly theirs," the "dimension" repositioned by a crucial shift of pronoun from the hitherto prevailing second person singular (Szirtes 1991a, 11). In doing so, it also establishes the poetic dimensions—form, metre, density and responsibility of language, the proper and the due—of what Holub (citing Turner and Pöpel's "Poetry") calls "rhythmic community:"

> In addition, metre clearly synchronises the speaker with the audience and provokes a "rhythmic community" essential to the "social solidarity"—the great presence and simultaneity of people—which is about the best that poetry can do. (Holub 1990, 3)

Synchronicity of poem and audience—"about the best poetry can do"—is a form of "bridging," the establishment of passages for intercommunication and exchange between reader and text.

"Wild Garden," a key poem in "Bridge Passages," grounds this intercommunication and exchange in translation, the process of linguistic exchange and transformation implicit throughout *Bridge Passages*, and foregrounds etymology as the dimension of poetry's effect. The poem opens with the Hungarian word *Vadkert* (a compounding of *vad*, "wild" or "untamed," from Lapp *vuowde* meaning "forest," and *kert* meaning "garden," giving the familiar Hungarian surname *Kertész*, meaning "gardener"), which it immediately glosses as "The wild garden," an English phrase for a Hungarian neologism that roughly translates as "nature reserve." The "wild garden" offers another pastoral interlude, a space circumscribed by "bridges, masonry and trees / which spread

themselves like railway stations:" the "airless music" repeating the "dissolving" airs of "Nachtmusik." But the pastoral is tainted: its "grave / ceremonial greenness" suggests a Marvellian tincture hamstrung in its potential liberation by that hanging "grave," both a demeanour (the garden personified) and a final resting place.

The penultimate stanza of "Wild Garden" alludes to Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*: where Isherwood writes of a Berlin about to elect the Nazis and of an act that has been accomplished—"Over there, in the city, the votes were being counted" (Isherwood 2004, 453). Szirtes emphasises the popular voice of democratic freedom as offering a potential future: "In the city they're counting votes / and learning how to speak" (Szirtes 1991a, 57). In 1989, speech and freedom of speech accompany, and are the projected or desired end product of, the moment of and the movement towards democracy: "Wild Garden"'s "grave / ceremonial greenness" is also, in relation to "learning how to speak," the "greenness" (Blake's "Ecchoing Green"; Blake 1972, 116-7) of innocence and inexperience, a colour for a nation finding its voice. Holub warns us that "The dimension of the psychological present probably does not only concern speech; speech is a phenomenon suitable for demonstration and measuring" (Holub 1990, 5). Speech, in "Wild Garden," leads almost inexorably to the "society of worms and ants and clods," which "lived in terror of the creatures / of the garden." The garden's wildness is now not untamed but bestial; as the thrice-mentioned peacock alerts us to the deception of appearances, so the ambiguity of "lie" is embedded in the otherwise Audenesque "Bucolics" of the world outside:

> And beyond them lie the woods,
> the lakes, the sea and the enormous waves
> on which we inscribe our human features.
> (Szirtes 1991, 57)

The poem concludes with the immense force of the "enormous waves" as figures of irresistible historical transformation; not speech, but the "inscription" of "human features"—the anthropomorphisation of nature, the laying-bare of pastoral myths—provides the closing image, leading to the next poem—the elegy to Sandor Weöres, who, continuing writing's sudden pre-eminence, "signed my book / in a childish trembling hand" (Szirtes 1991a, 58).

In an essay published in the "Times Literary Supplement" in November 17, 1989 (amid the events in Eastern Europe), Geoffrey Hill wrote of the contemporary world as "the world of amnesia and commodity" (Hill 2003, 27).

Szirtes, writing at the same historical moment, offered his own version of this world in his essay "Learning from Brezhnev" where he notes the different relations of East and West to history:

> The history of Eastern Europe is unhappy and that unhappiness permeates its consciousness. We live in a world that is losing its history. We know it as consumable unexperienced information. In Eastern Europe writers could articulate and preserve historical experience in the face of tyranny. We appear to be haunted by historical thinness, they by historical density. (Szirtes 1991b, 22)

This perception of the "density" of Eastern European history saturates *Bridge Passages*, not least in its relation to the words it uses; etymological density manifests the collection's concern with "the dimensions of the present moment" as a fundamentally lexical pre-occupation, an awareness that "learning how to speak" involves also being aware of and responsible for the freight that one's words carry with them.

Bridge Passages' responses to Hungary's experience of "the present moment" of transition, its potential becoming an "international bridge," are cagily evasive. Szirtes offers, in the final stanza of "Street Entertainment," a poetic disclaimer—"I'm only a reporter whose truth lies / in diction clear as water," water (over which the bridges stride) which "darkens like a bruise" (Szirtes 1991a, 44). The collocation of "truth" and "lies" renders each, in a further Blakean moment of "staining the water clear" (Blake 1972, 111), fatally ambiguous: the non-values they assert muddy into a careful ambivalence the status of a poetry and a speech (the popular "voice" of capitalism, a speech imbued by its very possibility with ideological "freedoms") that position themselves throughout the collection somewhere between "truth" and "lies," things to be learnt and burdens of guilt, tools for the gauging of the dimensions of the present moment, seeking ways of bridging the passage or transition from Communism to capitalism.

Notes

1. Szirtes, George. "The Underground in the Underground." BBC Radio 4, aired on November 28th 1989. Transcript available at http://www.georgeszirtes.co.uk/index.php?page=articles.