

A View After the Storm

Review of Katrin Berndt and Andrew Wells (eds.), *The “Second World” in Contemporary British Writing* (Göttingen, V&R unipress / Brill, 2024)

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This collection of essays offers images of the “Second World,” understood as Central and Eastern Europe, twice mirrored: as created by British writers after World War II, and as interpreted by academics from the region who currently work in the field of English/British studies. The volume also features a short story by Fiona Rintoul and an interview with historian and journalist Katja Hoyer. We read, with fascination, how those we read read us. Literary scholars, historians, linguists, comparativists and cultural studies experts turn their trained critical gazes on (mostly) British fiction and film examining East-Central Europe.

The volume, a goldmine of references to critical and fictional works on the topic, is dedicated to the memory of Peter Davison (1926–2022), editor of *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, in recognition that “[o]ur need to listen to Orwell is as urgent as ever” (Acknowledgement 9). The purpose of the collection, as editors Katrin Berndt and Andrew Wells explain, is “to discuss British writers’ engagement with settings, motifs, and characters of the ‘second world’ as a particular historical place and period, and to ask about the broader cultural significance of this ‘second world’ in British writing from the end of the Cold War to the present” (Introduction 11).

The definition of the term the “Second World” is among the primary concerns of the authors. Most essays offer their own definition, including a specification of which areas of the region the term refers to. The focus is on East-Central

Europe, rather than on Post-Soviet States. The contributors focus primarily on Germany, before and after reunification, but there are voices from Poland, Romania, and Hungary as well.

The issues explored by the works covered in the volume are sensitive; for citizens of the region, they reference lived historical experience, while for English-speaking audiences they present results of a not particularly successful social experiment. The essays explore questions of identity, history, and politics, and bring into sharp focus partially processed historical events that continue to shape respective and collective self-images in the region. On the other hand, for the British works discussed here, there is an “idea of a new, imagined community shaped by shared Cold War history” (Introduction 13). The interest in the essays towards their topics is palpable, fuelled by their authors’ cultural allegiances; the necessary distance is provided by the eye of the British beholder whose visions are discussed. Time boundaries are significant: the essays were presented at a conference in Halle, September 2022 (Acknowledgement 9), and focus on the Cold War period and after, yet mostly avoid the recent tragedies and upheavals of the region.

In the first section, called “The Presence of the Past: Contingencies of the ‘Second World,’” Richard Brown discusses Ian McEwan’s Berlin novels, *The Innocent* (1990), *Black Dogs* (1992), and *Lessons* (2022); Betiel Wasihun explores the notion of betrayal in John le Carré’s spy fiction; Robert Kusek reads Deborah Levy as a representative of a Central-European cultural heritage; and Katrin Brendt writes about retroopian projections in Philip Sington’s *The Valley of Unknowing* (2012) and Fiona Rintoul’s *The Leipzig Affair* (2014). The region seems to present a time warp for non-locals; here they can enter the past, or an alternative reality, a world that is familiar enough to understand yet sufficiently alien that it can be observed with some detachment. Levy is a South-Africa born British writer who now lives in France but came from a Jewish family who had immigrated from Lithuania (57–58), yet she starts her autobiographical project *Things I Don’t Want to Know* (2013) “with a recollection of her visit to Poland in 1988” (64), making her a virtual Central-European, broadening the scope of what “the second world” might mean in terms of transgenerational memory and identification. The section’s final piece is Fiona Rintoul’s short story “Mitropa.”

The second section, called “Second Glances: Retrospective Approaches to the ‘Second World,’” starts with a lexicographer’s approach to the concept in Ulrich Busse’s chapter, contextualising the “second world” in contrast not only

to the “first world” but also to the “third” and “fourth worlds.” Paul D. Morris presents the historical truth of the Holodomor and its imaginative portrayal as seen in Malcolm Muggeridge’s *Winter in Moscow* (1934) and Agnieszka Holland’s film *Mr. Jones* (2019). The appreciative exploration of an artistic and imaginative representation of history as opposed to a factually correct one comes with a warning, however, about “the epistemological and moral dangers of subordinating truth to ideology” (130), remembering all those who travelled to the Soviet Union from the West and refused to report the reality they actually found there. Andrew Wells’s essay delves into what has become called “file-based autobiographies” after Catherine Karen Roy’s work: autobiographical pieces that rely on secret police files as their material, starting point, or structure (139). Wells focuses on Timothy Garton Ash’s own *The File* (1997), setting against one another versions of memory as personally remembered and as preserved in documents generated through the gaze and the writing of informers. The closing piece of the section is an interview the editors conducted with Katia Hoyer on how people themselves experienced living in East Germany between 1949 and 1990, and how much actual interest this aspect generates in British audiences now.

The third section, called “Self and Other: Becoming (in) the ‘Second World,’” presents three chapters by scholars from Hungary (not necessarily focusing on Hungary) and a chapter focusing on Romania (not by a scholar from Romania). Ágnes Györke’s “Affective Encounters” sketches a horizon of a large number of works, then selects three specific pieces (Bruce Chatwin’s *Útz* [1988], Tibor Fischer’s *Under the Frog* [1992], and Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled* [1995]—all three extensively discussed elsewhere by Ágnes Harasztsos, and *The Unconsoled* also by Melinda Dabis), so as to focus on three cities and to illuminate the affective aspect, the way characters feel when encountering the Central and Eastern European “other.” Melinda Dabis returns to Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled*, this time tracing the Western literary portrayal of Central Europe as the “other” to its postcolonial roots and demonstrating how the region’s “voluntary self-colonisation is accompanied and challenged by nationalistic tendencies” (195). Therese-Marie Meyer’s “Liminal Morality: Complicity in Patrick McGuinness’s *The Last Hundred Days* (2011)” considers the unreality of “the Bucharest of Ceaușescu’s nationalist Stalinism and systematisation” (206) a special place of liminality. The “city between Orient and Occident, though still part of neither” (207), is shown as an apt setting for the protagonist’s moral struggle, centring on the notion of complicity as a human condition but also,

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specifically, as an inherent element of the system that leaves very little space for individual agency. The last piece of the section and of the volume itself is Ágnes Haraszto's imaginative and heavily theoretical essay "The 'Postmodern Baroque' as a Heterotopia for East-Central Europe in post-1989 British Fiction." Haraszto finds the roots of the region's dependencies on both East and West in the Ottoman and Habsburg subjugation, "the irruption of the latter coinciding with the predominance of baroque art and architecture" (222) and connects British novels about the region to Foucault's notion of projecting one's otherness, producing "heterotopias for the British discursive self" (223).

The material presented in this volume is rich, and the essays offer a great variety of disciplinary backgrounds. Yet the shared critical horizon and the single focus create a strong cohesion. Milan Kundera's "Tragedy of Central Europe" (1984) is a touchstone and a point of departure for several of the essays. The term "retrotopia" appears recurrently, in contrast to nostalgia or a hope for a future utopian prospect, as "a desire to reimagine 'genuine or putative aspects of the past' in view of the utopian prospect that it had once represented" (Zygmunt Bauman's *Retrotopia* [2017] qtd. in Brendt 73). The notion of the Central European "other" emerges several times throughout the collection.

The volume demonstrates that the topics covered are still of burning interest for the region and for the authors. The essays have the momentum of live engagement with the problems discussed. Reading this volume in the region it focuses on, the experience is still unsettling, especially if one considers all that work that was, or should have been, devoted to processing—understanding, evaluating and possibly integrating—the past. Even in Germany, where memory work was a national priority, where the unification of the country after the fall of the Berlin wall made finding a way towards reconciliation an absolute necessity, a lot of questions remained unresolved. Elsewhere, even more of that work was left undone, allowing for further tension to accumulate, perhaps producing further imaginative and scholarly publications.

The book as an object is a physical reflection of its content. Hard cover, stark, with a bleak black-and-white photo of a railway or light rail station, all concrete and functional, presumably from the DDR, with only women visible (N.B. gender issues are mostly left unexplored in the volume). The footnotes offer a complete introduction to critical works in the field. The thirteen pages of the Index present pointers towards authors (of fiction and theory), titles of works discussed, motifs (from "cars"

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to “surveillance”), key terminology (from “really existing socialism” to “inner emigration”), as well as common critical terms (from “dystopia” to “liminality”). The relative brevity and clear argumentation of the individual essays, as well as the excellent editing work, produce a well-rounded image of the “second world.” The volume is an open access publication, but printed copies are also available.

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Judit Friedrich, CSc, literary historian, independent scholar. Former associate professor at ELTE and academic advisor for generations of young scholars. Her work focuses on contemporary fiction, postmodernist fiction, cultural memory and gender studies. Founder and series editor (2010–2020) of *ELTE Papers in English Studies*, with student volumes *Good To Be 56: Writings in Honour of Tibor Fischer’s Birthdays* (2014); *Stunned into Uncertainty: Essays on Julian Barnes’s Fiction* (2014); and *Turning the Page: Gendered Identities in Contemporary Literary and Visual Cultures* (2018).