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## "Europeans without Euros": Alternative Narratives of Europe's 'New Happiness'

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### **Abstract**

*With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, belles paroles such as 'Europe without borders' and 'the family of European nations' announced in discourse - if not in reality - the 'reunification of Europe.' However, as the years of perpetual transition wore on, many Eastern European writers and intellectuals began to suggest Anschluss as a more appropriate description of East-West rapprochement. In fiction and in feuilletons, these writers and intellectuals pointed to the fact that while communism may have become water over the dam, generations of Eastern Europeans, unable to find their feet in the new circumstances, were drowning in the flood of Europe's 'new happiness.' This paper considers Dubravka Ugrešić's novel *Ministarstvo boli* (*The Ministry of Pain*, 2004) and Milan Kundera's *L'ignorance* (*Ignorance*, 2000) as alternative narratives of the post-Wende years; attempts to articulate the experiences of those whom Svetlana Boym would call "Europeans without euros."*

**Key Words:** Comparative Literature, European Reunification, Kundera, Post-Communism, Transition, Ugrešić

### **Introduction: "Toutes choses sont dites déjà"**

It seems that every new reflection on 'the changes' in Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall faces the defeat of falling somewhere between the epitaph of "*Ah! tout est bu, tout est mangé! Plus rien à dire!*"<sup>1</sup> and the aphorism of "*Toutes choses sont dites déjà; mais comme personne n'écoute, il faut toujours recommencer.*"<sup>2</sup> The two decades of accumulated erudition on the subject is (or at least should be) enough to dissipate the most persistent academic instinct for graphomania. In fact, so much has been said that it often seems that a Benjaminian compiling of quotations might well be the only legitimate way to avoid inadvertently plagiarizing something someone else once put

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: "Ah! everything has been drunk, everything has been eaten! There's nothing left to say!" (Paul Verlaine). Unless otherwise indicated, all translations in this paper are by its author.

<sup>2</sup> Translation: "Everything has been said before; but given that nobody listens, it is always necessary to go back to the beginning and start again." (André Gide).

much better. It is with these ineluctabilities in mind that this paper considers Dubravka Ugrešić's novel *Ministarstvo boli* (The Ministry of Pain, 2004) and Milan Kundera's *L'ignorance* (Ignorance, 2000) as alternative narratives of East-West rapprochement in the post-*Wende* years.<sup>3</sup> It is argued that Ugrešić and Kundera's novels articulate the experiences of the millions of 'losers' in Europe's alleged reunification, those whose stories are seldom told and to whom few ever listen. Furthermore, in the context of conservative attempts to morally and politically disqualify writers critical of the new European order, it is similarly argued that in the post-Wall period, literature, far from disappearing as a significant social force (as was expected), has remained a central and necessary medium for the expression of both dissent and disappointment.

With the fall of Wall, politicians, journalists, and historians competed to give name to what was believed to be a new *Stunde Null* in historical time, and almost immediately, new *belles paroles* such as 'Europe without borders' and 'the family of European nations' announced in discourse – if not in reality – 'the reunification of Europe.' The generic quality of these euphoric phrases – so ubiquitous as to make localizing their point of origin impossible – was soon complemented by country specific metaphors such as Helmut Kohl's assurance to East Germans that the five eastern states would soon become *blühende Landschaften* (blossoming landscapes), or Franjo Tuđman's frequent declaration that newly-independent Croatia was *raj na zemlji* (paradise on earth).

However, as the years of perpetual transition wore on, Eastern European writers and intellectuals such as Christa Wolf began to suggest *Anschluss* as a more appropriate description of East-West rapprochement.<sup>4</sup> That post-1989, Western Europe set about creating not the "common European home"<sup>5</sup> envisioned by Gorbachev in the optimism of *Perestroika*, but the division of Europe into victors and vanquished; the replacement of Churchill's "Iron Curtain"<sup>6</sup> with one sewn at Schengen. In fiction and in feuilletons, these writers and intellectuals pointed to the fact that while communism may have become water over the dam, generations of Eastern Europeans, unable to find their feet in the new circumstances, were drowning in the flood of Europe's 'new happiness.'<sup>7</sup> By

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<sup>3</sup> In spite of this paper's capitalisation of terms such as East, West, Eastern Europe, Western Europe etc., it should be noted that the violence of inclusion and exclusion they signify have led to numerous scholarly assaults on their legitimacy. As these disputes are beyond the scope of the present study, it bears underlining that here the terms are used descriptively and that their usage is in no way to suggest that they necessarily correspond to reified geographical, cultural, or other referents.

<sup>4</sup> C. Wolf, *Parting from Phantoms: Selected Writings, 1990-1994* (trans. Jan van Heurck), Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp. 9-10.

<sup>5</sup> Cris Shore suggests that Gorbachev first used the phrase (which Shore, unusually, translates as "common European house") in a French television interview in October 1985 (C. Shore, 'Metaphors of Europe: Integration and the Politics of Language', in S. L. Nugent and C. Shore (eds.), *Anthropology and Cultural Studies*, London, Pluto Press, 1997, pp. 126-159 (p.131).

<sup>6</sup> Churchill used the term "Iron Curtain" in his "Sinews of Peace" address of 5 March 1946, at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri.

<sup>7</sup> For the author of this paper, the term 'new happiness' has its origin in an *en passant* remark made by Boris Mikulić, who, referring to the Croatian literary milieu's hostility towards Dubravka Ugrešić for her anti-nationalist stance in the early 1990s, wrote of a "disgraceful pogrom by the literati against one of its members who doesn't want to participate in the new happiness, but to remain a writer, chooses the unhappiness of loneliness." Mikulić was ironically referring to the 'new happiness' of triumphant chauvinistic nationalism that accompanied Croatian independence. The term, also used ironically here, refers to the body of celebratory and rather empty phrases that have consistently accompanied processes of 'European reunification' over the past two decades. See Boris Mikulić, 'O

the mid-1990s East German intellectuals were pointing to the fact that, despite massive investment, Kohl's promised 'blossoming landscapes' had in reality become *schrumpfende Städte* (shrinking cities). And in the summer of 1995, it is unlikely that any of the estimated 250,000 Serbs who fled Croatia – the largest single exodus of a European population since ethnic Germans fled the Sudetenland – felt that they were leaving 'paradise on earth.'

In a book chapter on metaphors of European integration, anthropologist Cris Shore examines how metaphors are "central to the process of conceptualising Europe" and "key weapons in a struggle to direct and control the European agenda," and how they "lend legitimacy and authority to particular conceptions of Europe, while imposing silence or closure on other conceptions."<sup>8</sup> Shore (*inter alia*) decodes Gorbachev's use of "common European home," Kohl's fondness for 'railway' metaphors, as well as examples of *Eurocratese* such as "Variable Geometry" and "Concentric Circles" – whose points of origin appear lost somewhere in Brussels. Within a somewhat looser framework, the present study offers close readings of two literary texts, both of which challenge the euphoric political rhetoric of 'the reunification of Europe,' and in doing so, complicates the widely held view that the events of 1989 symbolically represented a kind of 'End of Literature' in Eastern Europe.

The central thesis of American scholar Andrew Wachtel's *Remaining Relevant after Communism*,<sup>9</sup> one of the few attempts to take the pulse of post-1989 Eastern European literary production as a whole, is that in the new conditions of democracy and free market economics literature in Eastern Europe is no longer as relevant as it once was. Wachtel outlines how in a part of the world where writers have historically been regarded (and often regarded themselves) as fathers of nations, 'engineers of human souls' (a phrase attributed to Stalin), and alternative governments, in the post-1989 period Eastern European writers lost a quick *Krieg ohne Schlacht*<sup>10</sup> with "the world of Total Entertainment."<sup>11</sup> Massively reduced print runs (the diktats of the market having replaced those of ideology), emasculated national budgets for culture, and the deluge of translated pulp literature, all support Wachtel's thesis on literature's post-1989 fall from grace. In *Literature in Post-Communist Russia and Eastern Europe*, Rajendra Chitnis complements Wachtel's sociological arguments by focussing on the new literary aesthetics of Russian, Czech, and Slovak writers who sought to "liberate" literature from its role as "the servant of social, political and ideological aims."<sup>12</sup> Academic studies to one side, Eastern European writers and intellectuals have themselves been very productive in both declaring (and often bemoaning) a kind of post-1989 'End of Literature.' With a 1991 essay resolutely entitled "Something Is Over," György Konrád

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anestetskom djelovanju konzerve čistog zraka i kroatotvornoj moći "jugonostalgije"; <<http://deenes.ffzg.hr/~bmikulic/Knjizevnost/ugresic1.htm>>, accessed 21 April 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Shore, op. cit., p. 127.

<sup>9</sup> A. Wachtel, *Remaining Relevant after Communism: The Role of the Writer in Eastern Europe*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Translation: War without slaughter. Also the title of GDR playwright Heiner Müller's 1992 autobiography, a title Müller borrowed from a 1957 novel by Ludwig Renn.

<sup>11</sup> P. Roth, *Shop Talk: A Writer and His Colleagues and Their Work*, New York, Vintage, 2002, p. 75.

<sup>12</sup> R. A. Chitnis, *Literature in Post-communist Russia and Eastern Europe: The Russian, Czech and Slovak Fiction of the Changes, 1988-1998*, London, Routledge, 2005, p. 1.

was one of the first out of the blocks, declaring that, “an age in the history of literature has come to an end.”<sup>13</sup> As Konrád writes:

Literature as we knew it under socialism – that is, literature as a national institution – has ceased to exist. Gone are our cheap books: the state no longer has an interest in whether its citizens read what its writers have to say. We writers are no longer high priests, but we are no longer heretics either. Nor was political dissent ever really the domain of literature proper: when criticism can be heard in parliament or read in the dailies, it does not need to play hide-and-seek between the covers.<sup>14</sup>

Given Wachtel’s thesis on Eastern European literature’s new social irrelevance, and Chitnis and Konrád’s suggestions regarding its radical depoliticisation, the present study is confronted with at least two anxieties, the first of which is whether Dubravka Ugrešić and Milan Kundera’s novels can at all be said to provide an ‘Eastern European’ perspective on Europe’s ‘new happiness.’ The question is a valid one: on the one hand, Kundera would no doubt protest that his one true homeland, Bohemia,<sup>15</sup> which he left in 1975 was never located in Eastern, but in Central Europe, and that in any case, he was now a French writer. On the other, Ugrešić, who, having fallen foul of the *Dorfkaiser*<sup>16</sup> of the new Croatian state has since 1993 lived in ‘voluntary exile’ in Amsterdam, would probably declare that if she couldn’t have Bibliopolis as her one true homeland, then she wanted Atlantis. And on a third spectre-like hand, their former milieus, eager to preserve distinguished traditions of equating emigration with treason would no doubt howl that both have been ‘writing for foreigners’ for years and are unfit ‘national’ representatives. However, given that literature is not soccer, the present study maintains that it is precisely Ugrešić and Kundera’s liminal, in-between status that makes their fiction so productive to consider questions of East-West estrangement and rapprochement two decades since the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>17</sup>

The second anxiety is that during the Cold War the most common criticism by Eastern European writers about the Western reception of their work was that it was being read not for its aesthetic or literary value, but as *reportage* from behind the Iron Curtain. They pointed to a division of labour in the Literary Republic in which Western writers were free to write about marital infidelity, the suburban abyss, and *taedium vitae*, while

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<sup>13</sup> G. Konrád, *The Melancholy of Rebirth: Essays from Post-Communist Central Europe, 1989-1994*, (translation M. Heim), New York, Harvest, 1995, p 70. The honour of being first out of the blocks appears to belong to Russian writer Viktor Erofeev, who, according to Chitnis, declared “the death of Soviet literature” in an essay entitled “*Pominki po sovjetskoj literature*” (A funeral feast for Soviet literature) published in *Literaturnaia gazeta* in July 1990 (see Chitnis, op.cit., p. 8). Among the many other critical essays by Eastern European writers, the title essay of Slovenian dramatist and novelist Drago Jančar’s 2004 collection *Šala, ironija in globlji pomen* (which the author of this paper read in Croatian translation), is likewise particularly biting on issues of the changed status and purpose of literature, as well as the apparently bleak prospects for post-1989 literature to find an audience either at home or abroad.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>15</sup> ‘Bohemia’ is Kundera’s sentimental nickname for the Czech lands, a reference to the Kingdom of Bohemia.

<sup>16</sup> Used here in the plural, the term literally means ‘village emperors,’ but (figuratively) better translates into English as ‘little kings.’

<sup>17</sup> It bears repeating that although this paper is based on close readings of only two works of fiction, the past two decades have seen a wellspring of critical Eastern European fiction, which – *inter alia* – has addressed questions of East-West relations and the often bitter disappointments of ‘the changes.’ In English translation, those interested in fiction of this nature may wish to consider Jáchym Topol’s *City Sister Silver* (2000), Ingo Schulze’s *Simple Stories* (2002), Dorota Masłowska’s *Snow White and Russian Red* (2005), and for a more Euroatlantic perspective, Bosnian-American writer Aleksandar Hemon’s *The Question of Bruno*, *Nowhere Man*, and *The Lazarus Project* (2000, 2002, 2008).

they had to stick to “politico-exotico-Communistski themes.”<sup>18</sup> The obvious dilemma confronting this paper is that in its suspension of significant discussion of literary aesthetics (not least in order to prevent ‘deafness across the disciplines’ in an interdisciplinary journal), it may well appear to treat Ugrešić and Kundera’s novels as little more than *reportage* from the New Europe. This, however, is a criticism that the author of this paper is prepared to live with. As offences against literature go, pretending (out of shyness?) that post-1989 literature from Eastern Europe has had nothing to ‘say’ about the events of the past twenty years appears a far worse offence. Impersonating the statue of the three monkeys is not an appropriate response to texts that, in addition to significant literary properties, contain recognisable political elements.

### Dubravka Ugrešić: *The Ministry of Pain*

In *The Captive Mind* Czesław Miłosz suggested that in his relationship with the West, the Eastern European intellectual often resembles a disappointed lover, one for whom a “sediment of sarcasm”<sup>19</sup> is all that remains of the affair. Reading Ugrešić and Kundera’s writing on East-West questions<sup>20</sup> one could at times be forgiven for thinking that Miłosz was on to something; that Cioran got it right when he claimed that “the pride of a man born in a small culture is forever wounded.”<sup>21</sup> It is perhaps with this thought in mind that Ugrešić prefaces *The Ministry of Pain* with the declaration: “In the novel readers have before them everything is imagined: the narrator, her story, the situation and characters. Even the place of action, Amsterdam, is not entirely real.”<sup>22</sup> Set in the wake

<sup>18</sup> D. Kiš, *Homo Poeticus: Essays and Interviews*, ed. Susan Sontag (trans. by M. Heim, R. Mannheim and others), New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995, p. 77.

<sup>19</sup> C. Miłosz, *The Captive Mind* (trans. by J. Zielonko), New York, Vintage, 1990, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> In the languages usefully available to the author of this paper (English, German, Croatian/Serbian) there is a growing body of scholarship on *The Ministry of Pain*. Centring on questions of East-West relations, the reading of the novel offered in this paper offers both a different frame of reference and extra-literary context, complimenting rather than challenging Velicković’s focus on exile, Bahun’s on the “impossible chronotope” of Yugoslavia, Kenneweg’s on nostalgia, and Andrea Zlatar’s reading of the novel in the context of Ugrešić’s literary oeuvre. That an East-West reading of the novel is particularly apposite is foregrounded by Celia Hawkesworth’s contention that “the whole big question of the relationship between ‘Eastern Europe’ and ‘the West’ and attitudes of ‘Easterners’ and ‘Westerners’ towards one and other” has been Ugrešić’s main literary preoccupation since her 1988 novel *Forsiranje romana-reke* (Fording the Stream of Consciousness) (C. Hawkesworth, ‘Vrijeme i mjesto u djelima Dubravke Ugrešić’, in Ž. Benčić and D. Fališevac (eds.), *Čovjek, Prostor, Vrijeme: Književnoantropološke studije iz hrvatske književnosti*, Zagreb, Disput, 2006, p. 432; V. Veličković, ‘Open Wounds, the Phenomenology of Exile and the Management of Pain: Dubravka Ugrešić’s *The Ministry of Pain*’, in A. Gutthy (ed.) *Literature in Exile of East and Central Europe*, New York, Peter Lang, 2009, pp. 139-154; S. Bahun, ‘There Was Once a Country: An Impossible Chronotope in the Writings of Slavenka Drakulić and Dubravka Ugrešić’, *The European Journal of English Studies*, Vol.14, No.1, 2010; A. Zlatar, ‘Pisanje u egzilu/azilu: Muzej bezuvjetne predaje i Ministarstvo boli u kontekstu proze Dubravke Ugrešić’, in *Tekst, tijelo, trauma: ogledi o suvremenoj enskoj književnosti*, Zagreb, Naklada Ljevak, 2004, pp. 119-38; and A. Kenneweg, ‘Schreiben über den Kommunismus als gesellschaftliche Aufgabe, (quasi-) autobiografische Sinnsuche und ästhetische Herausforderung: Das Beispiel Dubravka Ugrešić’, in U. Brunnbauer and S. Troebst (eds.), *Zwischen Amnesie und Nostalgie: Die Erinnerung an den Kommunismus in Südosteuropa*, Köln, Weimar; Wien, Böhlau, 2007, pp. 273-289.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in P. Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (trans. M.B. DeBevoise), Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 183.

<sup>22</sup> D. Ugrešić, *Ministarstvo boli*, Beograd, Fabrika knjiga, 2004, p. 4. All translations from the novel are my own and all page numbers refer to this edition. For the convenience of those who might read the novel in English, page numbers are also given in square brackets, which refer to the novel’s official English translation, publication details of which are provided in the bibliography. My own translations are somewhat more direct, and occasionally more literal, interpretations of the original Croatian text than the more naturalized official translation by Michael Henry Heim.

of the Yugoslav wars, *The Ministry of Pain* is narrated by a Croatian exile named Tanja, a temporary lecturer in Yugoslav literature at the University of Amsterdam. Given that Ugrešić herself spent a year teaching South Slavic literature there in the mid-1990s, her introductory declaration reaffirms her long held belief in the autonomy and non-referentiality of literature. It is likewise a graceful way to get her retaliation in first against any attempt to read the novel as autofiction or a *roman-à-clef*.<sup>23</sup>

In elliptical passages throughout the novel, Tanja offers cerebral and emotional observations on Amsterdam, a city built on the transience of sand and water. Although she sees the ornamentation on the city's houses as their inhabitants' attempts to ward off the fear of evanescence, her own endless train journeys are born of a related fear, of a need to establish semantic and external coordinates; to order her displaced experience against fixed points of reference. This fear of disappearing is shared by Tanja's fellow Yugoslav exiles in Amsterdam, who, grieving for lost environments and *lieux de mémoire* desperately search for surrogates in their new surroundings – for *their* benches on the waterfront, *their* town squares, *their* local cafés (emphasis in the original text).<sup>24</sup>

From the live dolls in the windows of the red light district to its porn shops that resemble toyshops and coffee shops decorated like kindergartens, Amsterdam appears to Tanja as an adult playground. Visiting Madurodam<sup>25</sup> she thinks she has finally located the perfect metaphor: Amsterdam is a “doll's house,” life performed in miniature, a world of “urban infantilism.”<sup>26</sup> Recalling a group of American tourists gathered around an old Amsterdam organ grinder and their gushing at how “cute” he is, using the Dutch equivalent of “cute” – *leuk* – she punctures the misunderstanding:

*Leuk* was a kind of antiseptic, a disinfectant to wipe away all stains, to put everything on an equal footing and make everything acceptable. Near my flat there was a gay pub called the Quinn's Head with a window display of twenty male dolls, Kens. The display was *leuk*. Walking past those dolls I would always remember the hundreds of Barbies - young Moldovan, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian women - who traffickers, traders in human flesh, had purchased in the provinces of Eastern Europe... I thought about the new series of Eastern European Barbies and Kens who had reached this Disneyland to amuse grown-up male children; so that grown-up little boys could push and pull their penises in and out of their flesh. But it was all so *leuk*. And *leuk* is, like every children's world, beyond good and evil: it is amoral, it is take it or leave it.<sup>27</sup>

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This does not imply any criticism of Heim's translation (as evidenced in the bibliography of this paper, Heim is the pre-eminent translator of Eastern European literature), but rather a different approach – one that is particularly well suited to the translation of individual sentences and short extracts such as those cited in this paper. It goes without saying that there are frequent overlaps between Heim's translation and those offered here.

<sup>23</sup> Literally, a novel with a 'key' – usually understood as a novel about real people only barely disguised by the veil of fiction.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25 [18].

<sup>25</sup> Built in 1952, Madurodam is a miniature city located in Scheveningen, The Hague (also home of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia). The replica of a Dutch town on a 1:25 scale it features many prominent Dutch landmarks, buildings, and monuments.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90 [79].

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90 [79].

Taken together Tanja's experience of Amsterdam as a place where “everything is just simulation, and where nothing is real,”<sup>28</sup> is representative of how she perceives the East-West dialectic as a whole. Her unflinching reworking of Philip Roth's assertion of the West as a place where “everything goes and nothing matters” (as opposed to the East where “nothing goes and everything matters”)<sup>29</sup> suggests a dialectic in which the West is ephemera and the East viscera: in a Europe united by commerce, the West will provide the cash and the Eastern body will be a tradeable commodity. But rather than moralize, Tanja quickly calls into question her reliability as a narrator. Echoing Svetlana Boym's suggestion of the Berlin Wall and metaphoric Iron Curtain as screens of mutual East-West fantasies,<sup>30</sup> Tanja wonders if she is using Amsterdam as a projection screen for her own nightmares and giving things meanings that are just not there. Imagining Amsterdam's heart pumping with candyfloss in place of blood, she wonders if it is in fact her own heart that is broken.

Whether Tanja is a reliable narrator or not, the novel's title suggests that cognitive dissonance mars the East-West relationship. Namely, the Ministry of Pain is what Tanja's refugee students call the tailor's shop where they work making S&M clothing for the Dutch porn industry. Having escaped a very real and involuntary ‘Ministry of Pain,’ young Yugoslavs work with leather, rubber, and latex to make accessories used to manufacture an ersatz pain for a (Western) recipient's pleasure: in this lexicon of East-West (mis)understanding, ‘pain’ clearly requires a double entry.

Irrespective of Tanja's self-awareness, her accounts of encounters between the Yugoslav *Trümmerleute* and Dutch society are occasionally built on Miłosz's “sediment of sarcasm.” She deflates the hypocrisy of Dutch liberalism, recalling how the Dutch authorities had been much more generous in granting residence permits to Yugoslavs claiming that they were the victims of sexual discrimination (i.e. that they were gay) than to the female victims of mass rape. And she observes how in a ‘reunified’ Europe her students feel marked as “foreigners,” “refugees,” “asylum seekers,” as “Balkanians” and “primitives,” as “children of post-communism.”<sup>31</sup> Yet Tanja is far from blind to her countrymen's own prejudices, noting their talent for referring to their hosts in pejoratives and diminutives’ Germans becoming “Krauts,” the Dutch “Dutchies” and so forth. Even her mother in Zagreb shows a surprising ability to dig into the repertoire of East-West stereotypes with a comment about tasteless Dutch tomatoes.

Nowhere, however, is the East-West divide more clearly depicted than in the guest-host or tenant-landlord relationship between Easterners and Westerners, a relationship that signals the enduring division of ‘the family of European nations’ into favoured sons and bastard outsiders. Early in the novel Tanja realizes that her students have little interest in literature; that studying is simply a ticket to a Dutch residency permit. When her contract at the university is not renewed (ostensibly due to budget cuts) the Head of Department “radiates sincerity” in telling her how sorry he is, but never makes the mistake of asking where she will go now – “cautious people don't ask questions whose

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 286 [241].

<sup>29</sup> Roth, op. cit., p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> S. Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York, Basic Books, 2001, pp. 226-27.

<sup>31</sup> Ugrešić, op. cit., p. 64 [52].

answers could see them obligated to do something.”<sup>32</sup> When he refuses to provide a letter promising employment for the next year on the grounds that doing so would be a lie, Tanja, almost in tears, points out that “the authorities don’t care about truth, they care about documents.”<sup>33</sup> In this sense the confrontation appears to subjectively confirm that the Iron Curtain has indeed been replaced by one sewn at Schengen, and – as Tanja has been warned – that the Dutch respect for other people’s privacy is often a perfect mask for actual indifference. It likewise illustrates exactly how the dispossessed come to resent the *Gemütlichkeit* of the domiciled.

Ensuring that *The Ministry of Pain* never becomes a didactic tale in which ‘Easterners’ for the hundredth time reprise their starring role as victim of a cold and uncaring ‘West,’ Ugrešić complicates the novel as it builds to a climax. Igor, a student with whom Tanja forms a damaged relationship accuses her of having tortured her students by forcing them to remember a life they only wanted to forget. Unlike her, he maintains, they have found ways to love Holland, a country in which “people of their own accord turn into amphibians, they turn the colour of sand and blend in, like fucking amphibians,”<sup>34</sup> dissolving into the landscape their only wish. Although not quite a Hollywood ending, Tanja’s own later surrender to the soothing amnesiac qualities of the Dutch landscape initially appears as a kind of (re)conciliatory gesture from Ugrešić. But the price of Tanja’s ‘new happiness’ is the complete dissolution of her former life, and it is only in thinking through the implications that we realize we have been sucker-punched. Namely, in the same way Croatian nationalists demanded Croats ‘overcome’ Yugoslavia by renouncing their former lives, Ugrešić uses Tanja’s fate to provocatively ask whether deleting the past is the only way for Eastern Europeans to overcome ‘East’ and ‘West.’

As the novel draws to a close Ugrešić inserts two extended essayistic passages which challenge not only the possibility of East-West rapprochement, but also the terms of any such *entente*. While Tanja remains the implied narrator of both passages, the first in particular reads as if narrated by new, different voice. It begins:

We are barbarians. People of our tribe bear the invisible stamp of Columbus’s delusion on their foreheads. We travel west and yet always end up in the east, however far westwards we reach, the further east we arrive. Our tribe is cursed. We settle on the outskirts of cities. We choose the fringes so that it will be easier to pack up our tents, when one day we set out on the road again, westwards, so that we may arrive further east. We live in crowded tower blocks, in grey prefabricated settlements... Some call them ghettos.<sup>35</sup>

In these ghettos satellite dishes sprout from every balcony, the embodiment of their owners’ love-hate with homelands they, like Columbus, are never really able to leave behind. The ‘barbarian’ settlements are off limits to all but accidental tourists, and the police leave residents alone to the screams of their young men’s knife fights, screams

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 232 [189].

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 232 [188-89].

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 250 [207].

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p. 269 [225].



that “eat into us like acid.”<sup>36</sup> The city’s burghers never stray into the greyness, claiming they lack the requisite “low-life visa” - “And why would they come?” asks the narratorial voice, “There’s nothing here, just us.”<sup>37</sup> For their part, the people of the fringes – “the false bottom of the perfect society”<sup>38</sup> – are rarely seen downtown, and so the division is entrenched, each side electing the safety of remaining among its own. Written in the first person plural, with its scattered references to mosques and prayer books, the ‘essay’ underlines that while the Elbe may remain the most familiar East-West fault line, there exist other fault lines, further to the East. While reified East-West zones may have officially disappeared with the Wall, in the ‘cosmopolitan’ cities of the continent’s western and northern edge divisions clearly remain, inchoate and amorphous undoubtedly, but as strictly demarcated as ever nonetheless.

In the second embedded ‘essay’ a narratorial voice more clearly identifiable as Tanja’s offers what initially appears to be a human possibility for East-West rapprochement - the impending arrival of a post-communist new man, a ‘compatible player’ wired for the new time. Mocking Eurocratic rhetoric, the voice suggests that these new people, fired in transition and minted with western doctorates, will be:

...[C]osmopolitans, globalists, multiculturalists, nationalists, representatives of ethnic identities and dispersive diasporic identities, all at once...[T]hey will be warriors for democracy in transitional conditions...words like *mobility*, *flexibility*, and *fluidity* will be like chewing gum in their mouths. They will be young, progressive people, the well paid commissars of European integration and enlargement, hammer hands on the construction of a new order, experts in *new, unique postnational political units*...They will write the word *Enlargement* with a capital, as if it were a new epoch, [as if it were] Humanism, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment.<sup>39</sup>

With Miłosz’s “sediment of sarcasm” rising in her every new sentence, Tanja suggests that while this new class may have reason to celebrate communism’s becoming water over the dam, their ability to swim in the new waters will be propelled by the millions of ‘losers’ who, unable to find their feet, will remain, to reiterate Boym’s phrase, “Europeans without euros”:<sup>40</sup>

On their way they will forget that the very same *flexibility*, *mobility* and *fluidity* that launched them to the surface has left a nameless mass at the water’s bottom. In their provincial backwaters people will carve out an existence producing commodities for Western European industrial magnates...Some will make it out of their provincial swamps and crawl their way to the banks of Western Europe. Those in luck will pick asparagus in German fields or tulips in Dutch fields; those out of luck will mop up other people’s shit.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Along with this image, the narrator depicts fish markets reeking of fish, butcher shops awash with blood, and the barbarian’s fearsome ability to multiply to underline viscera as a defining “Eastern” characteristic.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 271 [226].

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 271 [226].

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., pp. 280-82 [235-36]. It is important to note here that the italicisms in the text are given in English (and in italics) in the original Croatian version of the novel, highlighting both their apparent untranslatability and their imposed power in framing discourse on Europe.

<sup>40</sup> Boym, op. cit., p. 230.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., pp. 282-83 [247].

In the first significant History of Croatian literature to be published in post-independence Croatia Dubravka Ugrešić was declared one of only four writers who had “failed to recognise the historic moment for which Croatian literature had yearned for centuries.”<sup>42</sup> Reviewing *The Ministry of Pain* one Croatian critic suggested that having writing a book on the horrors of exile from “a comfortable residence abroad,”<sup>43</sup> Ugrešić, like all other Croatian writers in the West, should declare herself for what she is – (allegedly) a war profiteer. As any serious refutation of these accusations is beyond the scope of this paper, it is only possible to signal that the aggravating factor underlying much Croatian criticism of Ugrešić’s post-Yugoslav writing is her reluctance to uncritically embrace Croatia’s – and Europe’s – ‘new happiness.’<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, it was Russian poet Anna Akhmatova’s reluctance to uncritically embrace the totalitarian happiness of Stalinism that led to Andrei Zhdanov’s infamous 1946 dismissal of her work as being marked by “pessimism, melancholia, and disappointment in life.”<sup>45</sup> With this in mind, it bears repeating that if what *The Ministry of Pain* ‘says’ about East-West rapprochement is at times offensive to our optimism, we should nonetheless remain on guard – against ourselves – to not also end up in Zhdanov’s company.

## Milan Kundera: *Ignorance*

Nataša Kovačević suggests that in his 1993 novel *La Lenteur* (Slowness) and his 2000 novel *L’ignorance* (Ignorance) Milan Kundera “uncharacteristically affirms Czechoslovakia’s communist past, trying to reconsider its utopian promise.”<sup>46</sup> In its succinctness, Kovačević statement hints not only at the decades of controversy surrounding Kundera’s engagement on behalf of what he called “the kidnapped countries”<sup>47</sup> of Central Europe (and allegedly Orientalist views of Russia), but also at his

<sup>42</sup> D. Jelčić, *Povijest hrvatske književnosti: tisuljece od Bašćanske ploče do postmoderne*, Zagreb, Naklada Pavičić, 2004, p. 615.

<sup>43</sup> D. Grgić, review of *Ministarstvo boli*, <<http://www.radio101.hr/?section=2&page=3&item=612>>, accessed 19<sup>th</sup> October 2009.

<sup>44</sup> Following the foreign publication of two essays by Ugrešić critical of Croatian nationalism – “Die Saubere Kroatische Luft” (Clean Croatian Air) in the German weekly *Die Zeit* of 23 October 1992 (subsequently republished in the *Independent on Sunday* of 6 December 1992 as “Dirty Tyranny of Mr Clean”) and “Die Kultur der Lebkuchenherzen” (Gingerbread Heart Culture) in the February edition of Austrian literary journal *Literatur und Kritik* – Ugrešić was subjected to prolonged media harassment, which eventually led to her choosing ‘voluntary’ exile in Western Europe in late 1993. The most infamous of attack on Ugrešić (and four other Croatian female intellectuals) has become known as the “Witches of Rio” scandal, in which the five women involved were branded as “witches” and “feminists raping Croatia” by one of the country’s highest circulating weeklies. For the original story see “Hrvatske feministice siluju Hrvatsku!” *Globus*, 11 December, 1992, pp. 41-42. Among the numerous journalistic and scholarly accounts of the scandal, particularly recommended are: I. Đikić, ‘Zastava za metenje’, *Feral Tribune*, 21 September 1998, p. 34; J. Lukić, ‘Pisanje kao antipolitika’, *Reč*, Vol.64, No.10, 2001, pp. 73-102 (92-4); V. Kesić, ‘The High Price of Free Speech’, *Women’s Review of Books*, Vol.10, No.10-11, 1993, pp. 16-17; M. Tax, ‘Five Women Who Won’t Be Silenced: Croatia’s “Witches”’, *The Nation*, 18 December 1992; C. Tighe, ‘Witches of Croatia: Dubravka Ugrešić, *The Culture of Lies*’, in *Writing and Responsibility*, New York, Routledge, 2005.

<sup>45</sup> Cited in S. Brockmann, *German Literary Culture at the Zero Hour*, Rochester, NY, Camden House, 2004, p. 148.

<sup>46</sup> N. Kovacević, *Narrating Post/Communism: Colonial Discourse and Europe’s Borderline Civilization*, Routledge, 2008, p. 82.

<sup>47</sup> See Kundera’s essay “The Tragedy of Central Europe,” *New York Review of Books*, 26 April 1984, pp. 33-8, which is often cited as having initiated the contemporary debate over the existence of a distinctly Central (as opposed to Eastern) European space. A second essay “An Introduction to a Variation,” (*New York Review of Books*, 6 January 1985) on the same theme drew a sharp response from Joseph Brodsky entitled, “Why Milan Kundera is Wrong about Dostoyevski,” (*New York Review of Books*, 17 February 1985), a dispute which has drawn scholarly attention for well over two decades. For a useful introduction to Czech accusations that in exile Kundera began ‘writing for foreigners’ see H. Pichová, ‘Milan Kundera and the Identity of Central Europe’, in S. T. de Zepetnek (ed.), *Comparative Central*

much disputed position as an exiled Eastern European writer in the West. While the reading of *Ignorance* that follows occasionally overlaps with Kovačević's explicitly post-colonial reading, with frequent reference to Kundera's communist-era fiction published in exile, it contrarily suggests that the novel's fictional representations of communism, and its scepticism towards the West's attitudes and intentions towards Eastern Europe, are rather consistent with, than 'uncharacteristic' of, Kundera's literary output.

In a recent essay, Kundera notes how early in his emigration he was seen as "wrapped in an aura of respectable sadness," the aura lit by grand words such as "totalitarianism," "persecution," and "resistance."<sup>48</sup> Yet while Kundera's tragic fate as a banned and exiled writer may have been wonderful material for feuilleton writers wanting to make him a *cause célèbre*, a pro-Western champion of democracy, his fiction has always been more nuanced.<sup>49</sup> The narratorial voice of *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* reminds us that when the Communists took power in Czechoslovakia in February 1948, they did so "not in bloodshed and violence, but to the cheers of about half the population" and that "the half that cheered was the more dynamic, the more intelligent, the better half."<sup>50</sup> In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* the artist Sabina, who flees to Switzerland, refuses to wear the "halo of misfortune"<sup>51</sup> well-meaning Westerners place above her. Infuriated by seeing a picture of herself in an exhibition catalogue in Germany superimposed with barbed wire and accompanied by a biography that reads "like the life of a saint or a martyr,"<sup>52</sup> she is asked by her hosts whether she means to say that modern art isn't persecuted under Communism. She responds with a line that one could well imagine in the mouth of Kundera himself: "My enemy is kitsch, not Communism!"<sup>53</sup>

In *Ignorance* Kundera takes the problematics of 'return' to one's homeland as the novel's central theme and narrates the first post-*Wende* visits 'home' of Irena and Josef, widowed Czech émigrés who, following the failed Prague Spring, separately chose the uncertainty of life in emigration over the certainties of Gustáv Husák's Czechoslovakia.<sup>54</sup> Irena's experience of emigration in France mirrors that of Sabina in Geneva and that described by Kundera himself. She recalls that when she and her family arrived in Paris,

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*European Culture*, West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2002, pp. 103-114, and the 'conversation' between Philip Roth and Ivan Klíma in Roth's *Shop Talk*. That Kundera continues to inflame scholarly passions, see Tim West's recent attack on Kundera for his alleged lack of commitment to the Prague Spring (T. West, 'Destiny as Alibi: Milan Kundera, Václav Havel and the 'Czech Question' after 1968', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol.87, No.3, 2009, pp. 401-28) and Joseph Benatov's recycling of old - rather provincial - accusations that Kundera's exilic fiction involves exoticised representations of Eastern Europe tailored for Western readers' expectations and easy consumption (J. Benatov, 'Demystifying the Logic of *Tamizdat*: Philip Roth's Anti-Spectacular Literary Politics', *Poetics Today*, Vol.30, No.1, pp. 107-132).

<sup>48</sup> M. Kundera, *The Curtain: An Essay in Seven Parts* (trans. Linda Asher), New York, HarperCollins, 2007, pp. 53-54.

<sup>49</sup> In this regard, Wachtel cites the introduction to the English translation of Kundera's *The Farewell Party*, which begins "*The Farewell Party* attests to the longevity of political oppression in Czechoslovakia by never mentioning it" as an absurd example of how Cold War-era Eastern European literature was milked in the West for its political or extra-literary appeal (Wachtel, op. cit., p. 67).

<sup>50</sup> M. Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1980) (trans. M. Heim), London, Penguin, 1983, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup> M. Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) (trans. M. Heim), London, Faber and Faber, 1999, p. 251.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 252.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> For an elegant discussion of the novel's exilic poetics see F. Doloughan, 'The Myth of the Great Return: Memory, Longing and Forgetting in Milan Kundera's *Ignorance*', in M. Hanne (ed.) *Creativity in Exile*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2004, pp. 142-150.

the French, well informed that “Stalinism is an evil and emigration is a tragedy,”<sup>55</sup> simply sought confirmation of this a priori expertise and dutifully pinned a badge of suffering to her chest. When communism surprisingly implodes twenty years later Irena’s failure to enact what a friend spectacularly dubs “her Great Return”<sup>56</sup> results in mutual disappointment: her friends see her non-return as a refusal to confirm the suffering they have bestowed on to her, and Irena is upset “because...I’d thought they loved me not for my suffering but for my self.”<sup>57</sup>

With Irena’s story Kundera sets out to undermine the myth of exile as synonymous with heroic misfortune, and in doing so questions the way ‘Westerners’ tailor lives and fates for ‘Easterners’ while allowing themselves far more flexible designs for life. Shortly before the fall of the Wall Irena’s new partner Gustaf, a Swede, delights in informing her that his firm intends to open an office in Prague, “her city.”<sup>58</sup> Sensing his resentment when she disabuses him of his *idée fixe* idea that Prague is still “her city,” Irena realizes that he too has fallen in love with his own tragic projection of her. What upsets her is that Gustaf has a Swedish hometown he hates and to which he never wants to return, yet “everyone applauds him as *a nice, very cosmopolitan Scandinavian who’s already forgotten all about the place he comes from.*”<sup>59</sup> And so, following a visit to Paris by her domineering mother Irena finds herself thanking God that the “police barrier between the Communist countries and the West is pretty solid,”<sup>60</sup> and wondering whether emigration wasn’t just an illusion of misfortune “suggested by the way people perceive an émigré.”<sup>61</sup> Struck by the paradox that “the implacable forces of history that had attacked her freedom had set her free”<sup>62</sup> Irena offers an uncanny echo of Tanja’s observation in *The Ministry of Pain* that while the Yugoslav wars represented great loss for many, for others they were a perfect alibi “to throw away an old life and start again.”<sup>63</sup>

When Irena does finally return ‘home,’ like her former countryman Josef she encounters a homeland that has become foreign, and in this sense their Great Returns are in fact *Heimkehr in die Fremde*<sup>64</sup> – a return to a home that has become strange. The only place she does feel comfortable is walking the narrow tree-lined streets away from the town centre, “the Prague born at the turn of the previous century, the Prague of the Czech lower middle class, the Prague of her childhood.”<sup>65</sup> This Prague, however, stands in direct contrast to what she calls “the Prague of the postcards [...] the Prague of tourists and whores, the Prague of restaurants so expensive that her Czech friends can’t set foot

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<sup>55</sup> M. Kundera, *Ignorance* (trans. L. Asher), London, Faber and Faber, 2002, p. 168.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

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

<sup>58</sup> The name Gustaf is almost certainly an allusion to Gustáv Husák who in April 1969 with Soviet backing replaced the liberal Alexander Dubček as first secretary of the Czechoslovak communist party and from 1975-1989 served as president of Czechoslovakia. In *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* Kundera refers to Husák, one of Moscow’s most loyal allies, as “the president of forgetting.”

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>63</sup> Ugrešić, *op. cit.*, p. 13 [7].

<sup>64</sup> The title of a 1949 novel by Walter Kolbenhoff.

<sup>65</sup> Kundera, *Ignorance*, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

in them, the belly-dancer Prague writhing in the spotlight, Gustaf's Prague."<sup>66</sup> Exemplifying just how alien this new post-communist Prague has become, she coins new names for the city, adding different foreign suffixes to Gustaf's name – "Gustaftown. Gustafville. Gustafstadt. Gustafgrad."<sup>67</sup> In the wake of the Prague Spring, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being's* (anti-)hero Tomáš notes the erasure not only of Czech street names, but also the Czech names of hotels, cinemas, and cafes, all replaced with names from Russian history and geography. In *Ignorance*, in the wake of Europe's 'reunification,' Irena notes how the new Prague is full of English signs and labels, that English is used ubiquitously (especially for business), and that Czech has become little more than a background murmur. In this vision Prague is again an occupied city, annexed by a new, stronger power.

Svetlana Boym writes how "Kundera's immigrant women are never satisfied by their erotic encounters with 'progressive men'" and muses whether this might be accounted for by Kundera's "jealousy toward his beloved heroines."<sup>68</sup> Like Sabina's Swiss lover Franz in *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Gustaf embodies the naïve and progressive Western man, but in place of Franz's earnestness, Gustaf is defined by an apparent superficiality and stupidity. In an ironical gesture Irena buys Gustaf one of the new Prague's most ubiquitous souvenirs, a t-shirt printed with *Kafka was born in Prague* on the chest. Playing along with what he thinks is a joke he puts it on, beaming, oblivious to the fact that Irena really has come to see him as a moronic tourist. In this way Gustaf personifies the Western contribution to what Kundera outlines in another essay as the "restoration of a capitalist society with everything cruel and stupid that involves, with the vulgarity of crooks and parvenus."<sup>69</sup>

To those who placed Kundera on an anti-communist pedestal (a position of impotence, we might note) during the Cold War, this unexpected 'anti-capitalist' rhetoric is likely to be surprising and confusing, deceitful even. But all the passages of *Ignorance* related to East-West relations underline a broader misunderstanding between 'dissident' Eastern European writers and many of their champions in the West. Namely, writers such as Kundera appear to have broken a contract they never signed - one that stated that they would be grateful when Communism fell and enthusiastic about whatever came afterwards. Irena's friend Milada asks whether she has noticed "how after forty years of Communism, the bourgeoisie landed on its feet again in just a few days," how after a forty-year 'interregnum' their sons and grandsons have "taken over the banks, the newspapers, the parliament, the government."<sup>70</sup> Irena replies, "You really still are a Communist," to which Milada responds, "the word doesn't mean a thing anymore. But it's true I am still a girl from a poor family."<sup>71</sup>

In the novel's contrapuntal plot involving Josef, Kundera explicitly links what György Konrád would call the "forward march" of *embourgeoisement* or *Verbürgerlichung* with

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

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Boym, op. cit., p. 242.

<sup>69</sup> Kundera, *The Curtain*, op. cit., p. 26.

<sup>70</sup> Kundera, *Ignorance*, op. cit., p. 164.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

the forward march of globalization and concomitant loss of national sovereignty.<sup>72</sup> Josef suggests to a friend that the Soviet empire crumbled because it could no longer restrain aspirations for national independence, yet having won their freedom these newly ‘free’ nations appear less able than ever to regulate their own economies, set their own foreign policy, let alone chose their own advertising slogans. Exemplifying this is Josef’s understanding of a giant new billboard featuring a white and a black hand clasped together, accompanied by an acronym promising “security” and “solidarity.” (With a small leap of the imagination it is conceivable that Josef is in fact looking at an advertisement for the United Colours of Benetton.) The billboard reminds him of the propaganda murals of Russo-Czech brotherhood, the difference between the new billboard and old mural being that Russian hands, however detested, were actually a part of Czech history, while “in this country people hardly knew that blacks even existed.”<sup>73</sup> Leaving aside whether there is an underlying racism in Josef’s indignation, understood as anger at a new kind of economic colonization Josef’s observations reiterate a claim Günter Grass put rather more elegantly in his 1992 novel *Unkenrufe* (The Call of the Toad): “What was lost in the war is being retaken by economic power. True, it’s being done peacefully. No tanks, no dive-bombers. No dictator rules, only the free market.”<sup>74</sup>

## Conclusion: The Enduring ‘Relevance’ of Literature

Reflecting on the post-*Wende* replacement of Berlin street signs bearing the names of Communists murdered by the Nazis (and the retention of streets bearing the names of German fighter pilots), East German writer Christa Wolf wrote, “[a]ll coincidences, no doubt. Yet the coincidences are beginning to mount up, and coincidentally they all are heading in the same direction: to the right. This is a moment of opportunity, and people are taking advantage of it.”<sup>75</sup> In moving towards a conclusion the present study offers a similar series of ‘coincidences’ – attacks on writers critical of Europe’s ‘new happiness.’ The 1990 publication of Wolf’s *Was Bleibt* (What Remains) kicked off what became known as the *Deutsche Literaturstreit*, a dispute soon further inflamed by accusations that Wolf had collaborated with the Stasi, and that burned on well into the nineties when the cover of Germany’s leading weekly featured a picture of the country’s leading literary critic tearing up a copy of Günter Grass’s *Ein Weites Feld* (Too Far Afield).<sup>76</sup> In 2002, in contrast to the light-hearted *Ostalgie* depicted in films such as *Sonnenallee* (1999) and *Goodbye, Lenin!* (2003) Jana Hensel’s *Zonenkinder* (Children of the Zone), a contrarian memoir of a GDR childhood and meditation on post-*Wende* East German identity, managed to re-inflate the feuilletons on whether the GDR was indeed a ‘Stasi state,’ or a country where millions had tried to live worthwhile lives in circumstances

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<sup>72</sup> Konrád, op. cit., p. 23.

<sup>73</sup> Kundera, *Ignorance*, op. cit., p. 73.

<sup>74</sup> G. Grass, *The Call of the Toad*, trans. Ralph Mannheim, New York, Harvest, 1993, p. 204.

<sup>75</sup> Wolf, op. cit., p. 286.

<sup>76</sup> The weekly was *Der Spiegel*, the critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki. The cover story appeared on 21 August 1995. A weightier companion piece to *The Call of the Toad*, which dealt with German-Polish relations in the immediate post-1989 period, *Too Far Afield* was Grass’s attempt to give literary form to the *Wende* and the problematic realities of German reunification. In 1990 Grass published a collection of essays arguing against reunification; see *Deutscher Lastenausgleich* (translated as *Two-States – One Nation?*). Following Grass’s 2006 admission that he had been a teenage member of the Waffen-SS, one could also usefully consider the way in which many conservative commentators, in Germany and abroad, seized ‘the moment of opportunity’ to resettle old historical scores.

West Germans never tried hard enough to understand.<sup>77</sup> In 1993 in Croatia the spectre of medieval witchburning was revived when Dubravka Ugrešić and four other female writers were infamously branded as “witches”<sup>78</sup> by one of the country’s leading weeklies, a campaign encouraged by government media. In 2007, the Polish Minister of Education tried to ban the ‘morally damaging’ works of Witold Gombrowicz and others from the school curriculum. And in 2008, Milan Kundera was accused of (in 1950) denouncing a man he had never met as a Western spy, leading to the man’s incarceration for 14 years.

With the exception of the Polish exile Gombrowicz who died in 1969, all of the above writers have articulated positions that challenge the euphoria of ‘the reunification of Europe,’ and on an East-West axis, offered somber assessments of relations within ‘the family of European nations.’ In and of itself this is hardly surprising: good literature, like all good art, is rarely euphoric. Whether we take Danilo Kiš’s edict that a writer’s power is doubt, or the bleakness of the *Trümmerliteratur* of Heinrich Böll, East and West, “pessimism, melancholia, and disappointment” are more often than not the business of literature. That writers are repeatedly attacked for their doubts - particularly in their homelands - is less surprising still. Yet in the post-communist period it is the very persistence of these ‘coincidental’ attacks that paradoxically confirm literature as far from a spent or irrelevant social force. Many Eastern European writers certainly hoped that the advent of post-communism would finally allow their literature the freedom to ‘say’ nothing, to become a private metaphysical matter and to be read as such. Yet whether desired by Ugrešić and Kundera, works of fiction such as *The Ministry of Pain* and *Ignorance* illustrate that in a ‘reunified’ Europe it is as necessary as ever for literature to provide alternative narratives of a given epoch, and for our purposes, to act as a different kind of barometer of ‘happiness’ with, and within, Europe.

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<sup>77</sup> In Germany *Zonenkinder* has sold over 350,000 copies and was quickly the subject of edited collection of essays entitled *Die Zonenkinder und Wir: Die Geschichte eines Phänomens* (T. Kraushaar (ed.), Reinbek bei Hamburg, Rowohlt, 2004).

<sup>78</sup> See footnote 44 for reference matter.

